INDIRA GOSWAMI

The Blue-necked God

TRANSLATED BY **GAYATRI BHATTACHARYYA**
INTRODUCTION BY **ARUNI KASHYAP**
AFTERWORD BY **NAMITA GOKHALE**

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Afterword

About the Author and Translator

Publisher's Note

It is a year since we lost one of our most talented and celebrated writers, Indira Raisom Goswami (1942— 2011) and we at Zubaan are proud to be able to pay tribute to her by publishing two of her well known novels in translation (both mark important firsts for us). Her last book, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar, is* the heroic tale of a Bodo woman who was the first revenue collector in British India and this is the first time it is being translated into English. Her iconic *The Blue-necked God*, published in 1976, is the first novel where a writer highlighted the exploitation and poverty of widows dumped in a 'sacred' city to eke out their days in prayer by uncaring, callous families under the guise of religious sanction and tradition and we present this in an all new translation. Both books carry Introductions by Aruni Kashyap a young writer and scholar who has a deep understanding of her work as well as Afterwords by Namita Gokhale and Preeti Gill.

Mamoni Baideo, as she was fondly called by her many readers, was one of Assam's most well known, immensely gifted writers, and she spoke out boldly and with passion about those whose voices had been silenced or never been heard, women, the marginalized, the powerless, the unfortunate. She has many awards and prizes to her credit including the country's highest literary prize, the Jnanpith Award. The Assamese government has honoured her with the Asom Ratna award posthumously in recognition of her great contribution to literature, art and culture and social service for among her many achievements is her unswerving commitment to peace, and her endeavour to bring to the discussion table the members of the militant ULFA in her homeland Assam, something that she faced severe criticism for but which nevertheless proved her to be a woman of immense courage and conviction.

Considered among the foremost writers in her home state as well as a brave campaigner for peace, she did not receive the importance she deserved at a broader level in India or even beyond. And this was partly because of a lack of quality translations of much of her work and also perhaps the fact that she chose to write about subjects and in a style that is very different from what is considered 'marketable' or 'popular' in today's urban, metro centric, fast paced milieu. It is precisely for her courage in doing this, and for her achievements as a woman, that we at Zubaan are proud to be the medium for passing on her legacy to the wider world.

Introduction

Iwas in the seventh standard when I had started reading the novels of Indira Goswami. By then, she had become such an established name in Assam that it was impossible not to know about her, especially when your parents are academics and writers. But *The Blue-necked God* wasn't the first book by Goswami I had read. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker,* which I think is her best novel, was the first novel by her that I had read. It was fished out from my father's office library.

By then, my parents had stopped barring me from reading stories meant for adults perhaps because they knew I wouldn't listen or perhaps, they saw their own childhood in me. Though both of them used to censor some novels by taking them away from my table, they too had understood the complicated world around them through the prism of narratives; my mother had gone further and tried to make sense of this chaos by writing two novels.

I remember, I had wept a lot after finishing *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. But though set in pre-independence Assam, that novel set in a religious monastery—*satra*—was familiar to my world. My grandparents were disciples of the Amronga Satra where the novel is set. Our ancestral village, where I spent most of my summer and winter vacations, wasn't different at all from the village described in the novel. The people in that novel worried about paddy, ate rice, rich ones owned elephants, washed their buffaloes in a local small river. We had the Tamulidobha river and Goswami's characters (including the elephant, Jogonnanth) bathed in the Jogoliya river. Mark Sahib, the British researcher, whom the protagonist of the novel, Giribala, falls in love with, has brown eyes and Goswami describes them as two brown suns setting on the chest of Jogoliya river. That world was familiar to me, for I, too, had plunged naked into ponds-streams-rivers avoiding the instructions and furrowed foreheads of relatives when I spent my vacations in Teteliguri Village—often, without the paranoid supervision of my parents. But I remember, I was drawn to the book not because of the name, but because of the name of the author. Roisom? Is she Assamese? Where is she from? What kind of a last name is that?

Bhupen Hazarika, had expanded the imagination of Assamese lyrics with his songs and taken us into melodious sensual tours of Austria, Mississippi and Mark Twain's Grave. Goswami, with her novels set in different parts of not just India, but also the world (two of her novels are set in Japan and Mauritius), stretched and challenged the imagination of Assamese readers, refusing to be trapped by predictable expectations. We went where her characters travelled and we cried because of the hardships her characters faced.

Neelkantha Braja, set in Lord Krishna's holy city was exotic for the Assamese

readers when the book came out in 1976. This book wasn't borrowed from my father's office library, but fished out from the wooden almirah of our house. I was intrigued by the title of the book. Since I had grown up listening to mythological stories through the naams sung in Teteliguri, by reading the tales from the puranas my uncles and father bought for me, I was familiar with the phrase Neelkanthi—when Lord Shiva drank the poison halahal to save the world from destruction, it turned his neck (kantha) into a bright blue colour due to the pain and hence, he is also called 'Neelkanthi'. But how could a city be blue-necked? I had to read the novel. I would say, the result was tragic— the depressive character Saudamini, who is destroyed by the forbidden relationship she is caught up in—scooped out the last bits of joy from my heart, making me weep because of her own terrible end.

I read the novel again when I had to prepare for my tenth board exams—a traumatic experience for most middle class Assamese families, where the parents remain more terrified than the candidates. Under the guidance of my professor mother, I had to prepare essays on my favourite books and authors for my Assamese exam. By then, I had secretly written several 'novels' and 'short stories' so what I was most stunned by while reading the book were its descriptive triumphs.

In this unfamiliar world—people rode horses, had non-Assamese names just like the last-name of the author, followed strange religious customs, where the widows were not called bidhovas, but 'Radheshyamis'. Here, ruins of temples takes the colour of ancient bark and scattered ruins of temples that are covered by small twigs and branches are 'like cobwebs entwined around old, forgotten things' and the dried up branches of thick, prickly bushes look like fish bones. I had grown up reading a lot of Assamese fiction, but these descriptions were outstanding and I wondered if I would be able to infuse my writing with so much life and vividness. Reading that novel to compose my notes for the board exams led to the beginning of a new problem: I started to read all her short stories and novels one by one that year and tried to write my own stories.

Indira Goswami's writing had captured the imagination of the people in our house so deeply that we spoke about her work all the time. When Ma and I would go to buy clothes in crowded, messy, smelly Fancy Bazar often using a dirty bylane to get there quickly, she would say, 'What a terrible smell—I don't think I can describe this, only Mamoni-baideo would be able to find a simile!' We owned a small orange garden in Teteliguri, that was just near the community stream of the village. One day, when I had gone there to take a bath during the 'male-time', I had smelled ripening oranges and told myself, 'What a beautiful smell, only Mamoni-jethai would be able to find an apt simile.' I was also frustrated that I failed to describe it.

The unique aspect of Goswami's similes and metaphors was that she used them not just to describe a scene. She extended them to etch the mood of the

atmosphere, create contrasts. The descriptions of the architectural ruins in *The Blue-necked God* are extended by the narration of anecdotes about the bloody history of Vrindavan, in Charanbehari's words, in conversations between the characters. From the beginning of the novel, Saudamini stores a field of desolation in her heart. But that doesn't take the story forward, nor does it show how intense the emptiness of her heart is unless there is a contrast. And this is provided by the lush descriptions of the religious activities, the laugher, the cheers and jeers of people when oiled, muscled wrestlers try to climb a greased pole, all of which serves to underline Saudamini's disconnect even more. My second read was that of an apprentice, not as a writer of board exams, but as a teller of stories. Proudly, I had decided, one day I would write better, more redolent descriptions, just as any writer dreams of doing—to beat his master in his own game.

I believe I realised the true value of this book and could place it within the entire oeuvre of Goswami only after I went to study in Delhi University. My hostel at St. Stephen's College was very close to her house in Professor's Colony, Chaatra Maarg. The Vishwa Vidyalaya metro station hadn't been constructed then. Very often, I would walk out of my college campus, through the Delhi University Chemistry Department to have evening tea with her because she was my local guardian.

The Blue-necked God was inspired by the short stint of the author at Vrindavan after her husband's untimely death. There, she had lived under the guidance of her father's friend and her mentor, Professor Upendra Lekharu, who inspired her to do research on the *Ramayana.* When she was offered a job at Delhi University, she moved out of Vrindavan to take it up.

In the so-called holy city where people went to receive salvation, what she saw was worse than terror : the poverty of widows who were abandoned to die there because their families didn't want to have anything to do with them. Their lives were recorded with an unflinching gaze by Goswami in this novel which is perhaps, the first and only novel that represents the dark side of Vrindavan. The book becomes especially valuable because it is enriched with her stint in the city. As she says, almost everything she writes in the novel is true. A reading of *An Unfinished Autobiography* further enlightens our understanding of the book. The first scene of Vrindavan in her autobiography shows a hefty paanda, chasing her vehicle, screaming and asking for more money, "I hadn't seen such naked greed and avarice ever in my life."

In 2006, when I was finishing my undergrad studies, Goswami had published a collection of poems called *Pain and Flesh* with illustrations by painter Jitendra Hazarika. In Delhi, it was released by the well known painter Jatin Das. A few days before the book release function, she said she would like me to read the poem 'Ode to a Whore' at the event. I felt immensely privileged. When I started reading the poem a day before the event, I was stunned by the

conceit she uses in the poem: a whore, who brews wine, can turn newly brewed wine into one that has been brewed a hundred years ago! People try hard to learn her secret recipe but she says, they don't know how hard the whole process is for her because, "I have lain fainted/In the dark hall of sorrow!/In agony/I have whipped my own flesh/and have drunk my own blood."

In many ways, the poem represents her own life and the women characters she infused life into. Goswami had tried to kill herself twice and those days, 'a girl's reputation' (whatever it means) would be totally destroyed by something like this. In her frank and bold autobiography, she maps her perennial struggle with chronic depression as well as her two suicide attempts.

But her honesty didn't go down well with some Assamese readers, especially some women critics who believed her autobiography would have a corrupting influence on the morals of Assamese women. She spoke hurtfully about that in several interviews and I understand why. For her, the memoir wasn't just about her life; she saw it as being representative of a whole host of issues women in the 60s and 70s faced. While writing it, she had this larger picture in mind. Several generations later, her autobiography is more famous than the author and it's title, appropriated in many contexts. Her life is an open-book, told, retold, exaggerated like a folk-tale and used for inspiration, by readers.

Like the speaker of the poem, once branded as a lady with a tainted reputation, it is not surprising that she went on to create two unforgettable women characters in Indian fiction who are 'fallen' in the eyes of the society. Both rebels, both of them 'whores' in the eyes of the society and both of them suicidal. Saudamini, the protagonist of *The Blue-necked God* arrives at the city of God, and she is suspected of being in love with a Christian man. Giribala, her fiery heroine from *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker,* breaks all rules and conventions that a high-caste widow is supposed to follow, throws herself at her 'Christian'/British lover in a dramatic climax. Like both these women, Goswami was not just suicidal, but had fallen in love and married two men who were outsiders to the upper-caste Assamese. Her first marriage in 1965 ended because of caste differences; he was Assamese, but belonged to a different caste. Her second marriage in 1966 was with Madhaven Roisom Iyengar, a young engineer from Bangalore, who came to built a bridge across the Brahmaputra river. If the speaker of the poem 'Ode to a Whore' is an extension of the challenged figure of the author, Saudamini's story in the novel *The Blue-Necked God* could well be understood as an ode to Saudamini. Thirty-six years later, no one contests the position of this novel in Assamese literature because like classic books, the pages of this tragic novel still heaves, reinvents itself in the minds of new readers from each generation.

Aruni Kashyap

November 2012, Minnesota, USA

One

Very few people got off at the Mathura Cantonment railway station that day. Nevertheless, there was quite a sizeable crowd of holy men, sadhus and sannyasins and, together with the noise and bustle of travel-weary passengers from distant places, they created an atmosphere of excitement and frenzy at this small station. There were a number of touts walking around the platform trying to smell out first-time pilgrims.

Dr Roychoudhury's family got down from the train. He and his wife, Anupama, had always wanted to spend their last years in Mathura. They had hoped to spend their old age in peace and quiet. But this was not to be because in their sunset years they had come face to face with tragedy. Their only daughter, Saudamini, had suddenly lost her husband. Saudamini was very young. And as if this was not bad enough, she had started having an affair with a Christian youth soon after she became a widow. Her behaviour was completely unacceptable to the orthodox and God-fearing Roychoudhury family. So, they resolved to take her to Brindavan in the hope that a few years at Braj might change their daughter's mind and bring her face to face with the realities of her life. Anupama herself was in poor health. She had once suffered from tuberculosis and these sudden distressing events played havoc with her already poor health. Dr Roychoudhury's great grandfather had once had a small dispensary in Brindavan. He wanted to revive this small hospital that was almost in ruins, and to run it for long as he could.

As soon as they alighted from the train, they saw Gautam, a paanda they had known for long years. He bowed to Dr Roychoudhury and said, "There is a tonga waiting for you at the gate. Please get into it while I see to your luggage."

Their luggage was quickly collected and loaded on the tonga. Saudamini noticed that the horses pulling it were strong and healthy. They barely seemed to feel the weight of the people and the baggage they were burdened with. There were innumerable such horse-drawn carriages all around them. This was the famous Jhulan time in Braj when pilgrims from far and near converged here. In order to attract the pilgrims, the carriages and horses were gorgeously decked up. The animals were festooned with garlands of tulsi leaves and shells, and crowned with peacock feathers. It was a beautiful sight.

Gautam paanda followed the tonga on his bicycle. As they turned onto the main highway, their carriage merged with others going in the same direction. As they left Mathura, and proceeded towards holy Brindavan, even the horses' hooves seemed to trot with a special joyous rhythm, as if in keeping with the spirit of the occasion.

Suddenly, Saudamini heard a deep and resonant voice. A man was following

close beside them on a bicycle. “One thousand years ago” he proclaimed dramatically, “Mahmud of Ghazni came with more than one lakh cavalry soldiers. That day, too, the dust from the horses’ hooves enveloped the entire city of Mathura. That dance of destruction lasted two whole days. Look at the forests on both sides of the road.” Saudamini turned to look and saw forests of dust-laden trees and thick prickly bushes. The branches and twigs of some of these had dried up and looked like thin, dry, fish bones. The purple blossoms on these plants looked like artificial flowers someone had stuck on the dried up branches. She also saw some peacocks here and there, dancing and showing off the full splendour of their plumage. The man spoke again, “Look deeper into the jungle, and in the gaps of the thorny bushes and plants, you will notice a more mysterious and intriguing forest. Long ago, when the blood of slain sadhus and sannyasins splattered the precincts of the temples, turning them into ugly monuments, wild bulls and leopards roamed these jungles. Yet, the devotees of sacred Braj had to flee to these animal infested forests in order to escape the torture of Mahmud Ghazni.”

The man certainly knew how to capture the attention of the pilgrims. His attractive, emotionally charged tone and his engaging manner created a spell. Saudamini, too, felt greatly attracted to his voice. In the meantime however, the strong horses of the tonga behind them overtook them.

It was the month of August, the season of many festivities at Brindavan. The place was crowded with people who had come from all over the country to participate in the various celebrations, like Jhulan, Radha Ashtami, etc. There were groups of sannyasins belonging to various sects, roaming the streets. The white dust of Radhabarg, with which many of them were covered, had etched patterns on their faces and bodies. But there was no hint of any kind of intoxication on any of their faces.

Broken bits from ruined temples could be seen strewn around the forest. Thin rope-like branches and twigs from the thorny bushes all around had covered them, very much like cobwebs entwined around old, forgotten things.

Saudamini heard the man’s voice again, “Words cannot describe the destruction and devastation that took place in the year 1018. It went on for twenty days! If the forest were to be dug up, one would find bits and pieces of ransacked and ruined stone statues even now. But, of course, the tyrant did not leave behind even the smallest of silver idols.”

By now there were a large number of tongas proceeding slowly in an orderly line along the road to Brindavan. It was as though, falling gradually under the spell of the poignant and attractive voice of the man, they were all advancing slowly and dreamily along the lovely road. This man was actually an assistant of a particular paanda, but he seemed to be an expert at catching unwary pilgrims by the sheer appeal of his eloquence. He was known as Charanbehari.

“Listen” he continued. “Listen to what the weak King Haradatta of Buland

did when he heard that Mahmud was on his way to loot Mathura." Charanbehari stopped for a moment at this point because a woman from one of the tongas was handing him a paan. "The wicked, licentious and lewd Haradatta threw all the images of the deities into the Jamuna river. Then, taking one crore rupees and thirty elephants with him, he went to Mahmud and surrendered, and sought his protection. On the other hand, what did the powerful emperor of Mahaban, do after acceding defeat at Mahmud's hands? He took his own queen and…

The tongas stopped. It was time to water the horses. Some kindhearted and generous devotee had built a number of concrete tanks by the roadside where water was stored for the horses. The shade of the tall trees there kept the clean waters cool and thirst-quenching. The tongas broke line, and gathered in one place. Taking advantage of this, Charanbehari went to every carriage, although there was already a paanda with each one. These paandas were annoyed and shouted at him, "You have already trapped some pilgrims; why are you coming here?" A biri smoking paanda caught everyone's attention by declaring in a loud voice, "In Braj, people know more about your greed and your skill in ensnaring pilgrims with emotional talk, than they know about 'Rangaji'!" The other paandas enjoyed this brazen attack on Charanbehari, and the teasing and sneering went on for some time. There was an exchange of angry words but fortunately it stopped short of an exchange of blows, something that was not at all uncommon in these places.

The tongawallas got busy organizing their horses. "Hurry up!" they shouted to their passengers, "time is short. There are so many things to see—Jhulan, Ranganath's Lokhar Mela, Radha Ashtami—hurry up, there is no time to waste!"

There were innumerable devotees. Coins of all denominations lay scattered on the ground like dust. Everything sparkled, like a young maiden's bright chaddar, covering the upper part of her body.

The horses were hitched to their carriages, and they looked even stronger and more vigorous as they shook their freshly watered bodies. This time, Charanbehari tried to catch the attention of the people before he got on his bicycle. He shouted out in a loud voice, so that everyone could hear, 'Listen, all you devotees! I am telling you with utmost respect, if any of you are ever in any difficulty, do not hesitate to come to me. My name is Charanbehari Gautam. I can fix you up wherever you feel like staying, Maheshwari Kunj, Bhootgali, Retia Bazaar, anywhere…"

The paandas who were accompanying the other tongas got very annoyed and yelled out in anger! The fresh horses sped along as though they were on a smooth steel road! All was silent, except the loud clattering sound of the horses' hooves and the cry of the peacocks.

Suddenly, Saudamini noticed that Charanbehari was riding very close

behind their tonga. Seeing that she had noticed him, he cleverly guessed that she would be a very good listener. He also thought that it would be highly enjoyable riding so close behind this lovely young woman! He noticed that she was not wearing sindur, the mark of a married woman, in the parting in her hair. There was no mangal sutra around her neck, nor was she wearing any toe rings, other signs to show that she was married. She was not wearing the stark white sari of a widow either since young girls did not wear those nowadays.

He remembered some instances from the past. Once long ago, a group of young widows had come from Kummilla, Rajshahi, and East Dinajpur. They had had nothing to eat for many days, and were willing to do almost anything for a bit of food. There were some loose charactered girls among them, too. Charanbehari had been a restless youth at that time, and he used to go around with a group of licentious and dissipated young men. Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes. They had found those unfortunates who had been widowed at a very early age and whose only immediate problem was hunger because they had not eaten anything for days.

When he was just fifteen years old, Charanbehari had glimpsed the lovely, glistening, bare bosoms of a group of young women as he stood beneath the famous Bangshi Bot, the place where Lord Sri Krishna was supposed to have revelled with his Gopis.

"*Chi, chi!*" cried an old woman, interrupting his reminiscences. The rotis she had brought with her, wrapped in a piece of dirty old cloth, fell onto the dusty road. "*Chi, chi!*" she cried out again, in sorrow and disgust…

Now, after all these years, Charanbehari thought sadly that those young widows probably had never had the chance to become mothers. Otherwise there would have at least been some faint mark on their breasts, where their infants had suckled.

There was utter silence, except for the sound of the horses' hooves and the grinding sound of the turning wheels. Charanbehari, once again, took advantage of this silence to say, "Hear what happened next." The travellers seemed eager to listen to his stories so Charanbehari began, "Next came Sikander Lodi. That was four hundred years ago… This Sikander Sahib destroyed all the temples of Mathura, and set up butchers' shops in their place. And, he ordered that the broken pieces of the images of the deities be made into weights for measuring meat that these butchers were selling!" The pilgrims looked shocked and did not utter a word. Charanbehari glanced at the tonga in front of him. The girl's body bounced with every jerk of the tonga, and this involuntary jerking revealed clearly all those places in her lovely young body, where the flesh had gathered to the greatest advantage. But, he was taken by surprise when he looked at her eyes for they were filled with tears, and looked

like deep, limpid pools.

Was it possible that what he had said about Sikander Lodi, about turning the broken idols into weights and measures, had affected her so much? Impossible!

Truly, he thought, the shadows of unknown sorrow make beautiful women still more attractive! But, just as this thought came to his mind, a very surprising thing happened! The sorrow that shadowed Saudamini's face suddenly seemed to take on another hue. As he looked at her, he saw to his astonishment, that this girl's face had taken on the features of his own daughter's face! His daughter was fast growing up, and he thought about her on many occasions and for many reasons. Yes, his daughter was growing up. She had started to weave garlands of jasmine, and put them around Lord Murulidhar's image.

Charanbehari controlled himself.

He continued, "The Koran forbids the worship of idols. Therefore the Muslim historians glorified the vicious acts of looting and destruction of the temples and declared the Badshahs who ordered these heinous acts, to be the pride and glory of Islam." Before Charanbehari could finish what he was trying to say the tongas had reached Lilabarg. The woods of Lilabarg were full of all kinds of dry, prickly shrubs and bushes.

Gautam paanda, who was riding his bicycle alongside Roychoudhuri's tonga, said, "Lilababa's Jhulan procession has not yet started And one can still see the signs of the Jhulan festival which took place only the other day." The tonga passengers looked around, and noticed the remains of fireworks and crackers scattered all over the place. There were heaps of packets made from the tomal leaf that were used for packing food.

Brindavan took on a completely different appearance almost as soon as they reached Sree Anandamoyee Ma's Ashram. Gautam paanda said, "This year, the traders from Barsona are late. They've only just started coming. There's been a bad drought in those areas and it is only now that a few carts have started moving." Indeed, a couple of bullock carts could be seen on the highway. Carts that were big and wide like the camel-drawn carts of Saurashtra. They were so heavily burdened with people and baggage, that the necks of the poor bullocks drawing them almost touched the ground under the sheer weight.

The tongas came and stopped in front of the octroi tax gate. The gate was closed but there was a lot of security around it. Because of the Jhulan festival taxes had been clamped on the heavier baggage. A large lathi-wielding sepoy advanced towards the Roychoudhury's tonga. He looked around, and ordered in a gruff voice, "Get down, all of you. You will have to pay a fine."

Gautam paanda who had been following them on his bicycle, whispered to Roychoudhury, "Just give him ten rupees. That will be enough to keep his mouth shut."

Gautam paanda proved to be right. The gate opened and as soon as they came near it they were told to go through.

Saudamini's eyes filled with tears as she saw the dome of the Ranganath Temple. This had been her late husband's favourite temple and he'd come here very often while he was in college. There was a big mela at Ranganath today, celebrating the popular festival of Jhulan. The area around the temple was filled with small and colourful stalls selling a vast variety of things. In a stall near the *Singha Duar* (the Lion Door), Saudamini noticed a man selling medicines. He occupied a large space where he displayed strange things like tiger oil, crocodile skin, the bones and bile of various fish, and so on. He had an old, worn out loudspeaker in front of him and he continuously blared out the various benefits of what he was selling. There was also a tiny zoo-like stall, decorated with bits and pieces of multi-coloured cloth. This booth, too, attracted many people. There were some starving, skeleton-like beggars, too, near this *Singha Duar*. Since it was festival time, many wealthy Sethjis had come to worship, and they would be doling out food and clothes (*bhandaar*) to the needy of Brindavan. Some might even give out dhotis, saris and blankets. Nothing could be more attractive to those eternally starving creatures who were eking out their lives at Braj. Even the lepers who normally hid themselves in the dark galis came out that day. The people of Braj used to say that these lepers purposely stayed cooped up in these dark and dank lanes, so that their already damaged limbs could become uglier and more frightening still, deprived of sun and air.

One by one the tongas slowly went past the bend in the road, and here the line of carriages split into two. Charanbehari, by the sheer strength of his voice, and his choice of words, managed to guide the majority of them, through the tongashala, towards Retia Bazar.

Dr Roychoudhury's tonga, however, took the road towards Gopinath Bazar. Saudamini noticed that almost all the buildings were dilapidated and in ruins. The ruins had taken on the colour of ancient bark, or ancient manuscripts. She also noticed that there were some narrow lanes that started in a particular place, but then seemed to lead nowhere, they simply vanished mysteriously!

The tonga stopped in front of a broken temple in the small ashram-like compound of Dasarath Akhara. The rooms on the ground floor of the temple were thrown open and Dr Roychoudhuri showed Saudamini into a small room towards the back of the building. She felt suffocated as soon as she entered the dark room. There seemed to be no opening in any of the walls for the sun or air to enter, and it seemed as though the room had been built underground. In the darkness she started feeling along the walls, and to her relief she found that there was one small opening. She pulled open the tiny window and a thin stream of pale light poured into the dank room. She noticed that there was a neem tree near the window. Suddenly she heard people murmuring somewhere

not too far away, and she craned her neck to look. Yes, there they were, a group of old women squatting on the ground with their heads between their knees, a dead body in front of them! None of them were weeping, or showing any signs of grief or sorrow. They simply sat there looking helpless, as if they had no idea what they should, or could, do. The meagre belongings of the dead woman lay scattered all around: a heap of old, tattered clothes of various discoloured shades, her clay pitcher for drinking water, the cow-dung fuel that she used to keep warm in winter.

Suddenly, a tall and hefty paanda arrived there as if he were Yamadoot, the god of death, himself! The timid old women crouched even closer together. The paanda started throwing the dead woman's things around, looking through them. He kicked the water pitcher and the cow-dung chappatis and the old women cringed with fear and retreated a few paces. Not satisfied with this, the man started poking about the dead body. Who knew, perhaps the old woman had hidden away gold or silver coins on her person. Perhaps tied them around her waist, or on her upper arms?

There must have been something, because the paanda pulled out something from the corpse. As the dead woman fell face down on the khatia the lower part of her body bare, Saudamini stared in shocked disbelief. The paanda took whatever he had found and examined it in a better light. Then, with a disgusted grimace, he flung it as far as he could.

He said, "I am sure that she must have left something with one of you. After all, she was a radheshyami* in the Bhajan Ashram."

The women looked at each other. Then one of them, gathering courage, replied, "The old woman used to wash your dishes and knead the flour for your rotis."

The man shouted at her, "Shut up! Shut up! I will send four men to remove the corpse. They will take the body and dump it in the Jamuna."

The old women looked at each other again. They remembered the four men he was referring to, the men who went around like vultures smelling out the dead! When an old woman happened to die in the crowds at the Radha Ashtami mela, or when one was crushed to death in the stampede during the Ranganath Rath mela, these men would loiter near these corpses in the hope that maybe one of these old women had a gold tooth! So these four men delegated to drag away unclaimed dead bodies, would hang around the crowded places of Braj, like the eighty-*krosh*-long sacred circumambulation of Braj, the popular Nanda Utsav, the Holi festival, the Haronga festival, etc.

By the time Saudamini had gone up to the roof that afternoon, after settling into her new home, the sun was already hidden behind the rows of neem trees. From where she stood, she could get a clear view of the vast courtyard of the Rangaji Temple. The crowds were already starting to gather at the venue where the competition, the lokhar mela was being observed that day. There was that

massive lokha pillar, holding on to which the wrestlers would try to prove their strength that day. Some priests were standing on a platform, pouring oil and water on the post, and in the thin light of the waning sun, it shone like the sleek and slippery skin of a snake. A richly decorated elephant was brought near the platform and the excitement and clamour increased among the crowds. Suddenly, a cannon-like sound was heard from the embankment of the Ranganath.

Saudamini's mother called out to her from below, "Come, daughter, come down. Let us go and see what is happening."

Anupama was familiar with the lanes and by-lanes of Braj, as she had come here a number of times before. Now she and her daughter proceeded on bare feet. The heaps of grapes in the market looked like bright glass; the garlands of tulsi, gopichandan and the stalls selling makhan mati, looked even more enticely colourful today. But none of these could beat the stall selling the much sought after ashtadhaatu, the eight precious and sacred metals, used to make statues of Balgopal, Muralidhar and of the kings of the Surya dynasty. There were many spectators around these stalls although there were not so many buyers since the items were quite expensive.

Anupama and her daughter, however, did not have the courage to enter the temple through the thronging crowds at the Lion Gate. Instead, holding Saudamini's hands tightly, Anupama tried to climb the steps near the gate. But by now, even the verandah here had become crowded with spectators. The cannon-like sound was heard again from the embankment and the expectant crowds roared in anticipation.

The bare-bodied wrestlers who were waiting, now started the difficult task of trying to climb the oily post and reach the platform. The post was already greasy, and the priests continuously poured pitcher after pitcher of oil and water on it from above. It was not an easy task to climb this post. One by one the competitors climbed to a certain level, and then they invariably slipped and fell on top of each other. And every time one of them slipped, the crowd burst into loud laughter!

A group from the Dehati Sangeet Dal was playing a bracing tune which seemed to incite and excite the wrestlers even more. Indeed, this was one of the best opportunities to prove their courage and skill to the vast sea of humanity. But none of them were able to climb beyond a certain point. They would slither up so far and then slip down again! And the good-natured laughter of the spectators became more and more uproarious, while Ranganath and his consort, Godamma, sat on their golden thrones and enjoyed the scene. Indeed, it was as though the Lord and Godamma had come down today in human form and were partaking of the excitement and fun.

"Ah! There is one man up! He's up!" roared the crowd. For one moment there was pin drop silence. One wrestler seemed to have climbed up almost to

the top. And, seemingly without any undue effort, he touched the last platform. There was pandemonium as the milling crowds seemed to go berserk with excitement! The security personnel near and around the Lion Gate wielded their batons wildly, but with hardly any effect. No one saw the ritual reward and blessing of Rangaji to the winner. Someone seemed to shout in Saudamini's and Anupama's ears, "Run! Run away as fast as you can! Can't you see, that sea of humanity is rushing to this side?"

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* Destitute women, mostly widows, who go to Brindaban seeking solace or in order to spend their last days in the holy city of Braj. They sing devotional songs in temples for which they are paid a pittance.

Two

Saudamini tried to get familiar with this new life and to adjust to it. She was inquisitive by nature so she was curious about everything around her: the life of the radheshyamis, the new temples, and the ancient ones, the ruins of Bilwamangal Kunj, the Sringar Bot, Sakshi Gopal, and she lost no time acquainting herself with it all. She even visited those ruined heaps that had once been impressive ancient monuments. Those ruins that were now entwined by jungles of thorny shrubs. For days, Saudamini wandered in those places, quite bewitched by their history and mythology. Indeed, she felt, these ancient ruins and temples of Braj had a peculiar charm that could touch the core of one's heart. Like those old stone statues of the Raj Bhawan in Jaipur that were now covered with moss, one could still hear their heartrending voices if one had the desire.

Aurangzeb had long ago ordered the swan-like necks of the priceless statues of Krishna's companions, the gopis carved on the ancient Govind Temple, to be broken to pieces. But even now, if one sits in meditation inside the broken old temple built of red stone, and listens intensely, one can hear the plaintive tunes of sorrow and torture.

In the meantime, Dr Roychoudhury had started working in the dispensary. So he was mostly away from home. Saudamini started to pass her time, particularly the afternoons, roaming around the *akhara* (ashram), and its neighbouring areas. There was a strange locality on the right-hand side of the *akhara*, in the small lane facing Harabari, and near this was the temple of Beharimohan Kunj.

One day, she crossed the roof of this temple, intending to go to this mysterious place. But as she was about to go down the steps, the sadhus who stayed in the temple said to her, "Since you are new here, it will be better if you do not go there." These words from the sadhus who slept on string cots on the roof and who passed their spare time playing the *pahkwaz,* only increased Saudamini's curiosity. Bowing respectfully in front of the priests, she replied, "Every inch of Brajdham's land is of interest to me."

She climbed down the broken and faded old steps. She saw an old unused well, the top of which was covered with a few moss covered wooden planks. Nearby were some small and dark dilapidated rooms that looked more like pigeon holes than human habitations. A large group of widowed radheshyamis dwelt here. They were grossly undernourished, and wore dirty and faded old dhotis. But their foreheads shone with *bibhuti* (sacred ash) and lines drawn with holy sandalwood. Seeing Saudamini, the old women came out of their pigeon holes and surrounded her inquisitively.

"Ladies, how do you make your living here?" Saudamini asked.

The 'ladies' looked at each other. Then one of them, sunken eyes shining with the brightness of the sun, replied, "When necessary, we sit at the gates of the Tortoise Temple, and at Rangaji and beg. When there is no other way, we spend the whole night in front of the temple, waiting and hoping for the *malcha* offerings.

"But if you had become radheshyamis singing bhajans in the temple, you would have been assured of at least two square meals a day," said Saudamini.

All the women cackled with laughter on hearing this, and one of them started singing mockingly, "*Sethbari's bhajan ashram*, *Gopinath's bhajan ashram, Borbag's bhajan ashram,* the stable's *bhajan ashram*!"

"Listen," she said, "The accountant got so fat on the radheshyami's money, that he cannot get up now. You must be new here, not to know this. This fat man sat and watched all the radheshyamis, their thin hands and feet, and starving bodies. He came to know which of them would kick the bucket, and when! He also came to know which dying radheshyami had how much money, and where. He found out everything. Everything!"

Again the old women cackled with laughter.

"One day, this wicked man was observing our legs. As soon as we knew this, we fled and saved ourselves. Otherwise he would have kicked us out. See, look at our legs." And they pulled their tattered clothes up to their knees and exposed their legs.

Saudamini hurriedly stepped back a few steps in fright and shock. All these women were sick! They had leprosy.

"My dear girl, we like begging at the Banke-Behari lane, at the doorway of Shahji Temple, on the steps of Daman Mohan…. People like you go there." And saying this, one of the women started stroking Saudamini's hand with her own hands. Saudamini went stiff with fright! But the ghostly woman seemed to get a peculiar satisfaction. Encouraged by the act of the first woman, another one started touching the gold bangles on Saudamini's wrist, while another came near her and said, "Give us some donation to keep us alive. You people live to eat, but we need to eat something in order to live. Give us something to keep us alive."

In the meantime, another group of old women came out of the small rooms and surrounded Saudamini. They started feeling and touching her soft young body, and then started scratching her all over in a strange and feverish excitement. Saudamini's hair came loose and cascaded down her back, her blouse was almost ripped off and, if some sadhus had not arrived at that moment, the women would have probably taken on the nature of wild wolves.

One of the sadhus shouted at the women, "Get out! Get out, you demons! Do you think there is no one to help her?"

Immediately all the old hags disappeared inside the pigeon holes.

The sadhu rebuked Saudamini, “Did I not tell you that you should not venture alone to these places? These old women can devour people. Come, I will see you on your way. And let me tell you another thing. These women are very unfortunate. I am told that you have come with the intention of making Braj your permanent home. Give some thought to the welfare of these women whenever you have the opportunity.”

Saudamini wiped the perspiration off her neck and face as soon as she stepped on to the main road of Gopinath Bazar. The bhajan ashram here had not yet closed its doors and an old widow was standing in the middle of a group singing bhajans to the accompaniment of small cymbals. A sentry sitting at the doorway, whose function it was to keep the accounts, was silently chanting the Lord’s name with prayer beads. Ever so often he would open his eyes and observe the radheshyamis, to see whether they were all really singing. These women were compelled to sing even if they were starving. They had to sing the Lord’s praises as loud as they could even if they were on the verge of choking. Saudamini noticed that, although they sang without stopping, very often their eyes would turn to the line of vegetable vendors. She noticed that the only buyers of the rotting, dried up vegetables that were heaped on one side were the poor radheshyamis.

Saudamini returned home, and entered her dark room again. She was trying her best to forget her loneliness, but it was not easy. Sometimes she would scrutinise her own body. She had a lovely, soft young body. Even the mental imbalance and torture of the past seven years had not been able to leave any permanent mark on this lovely body. Try as she might, she could not come to terms with the condition of her life or her situation. Was there anyone else, she wondered, who had suffered as she had, who had been compelled to face a situation like hers?

Three

Dr Roychoudhury and his wife were always very careful about their daughter and if her face showed the slightest sign of grief or unhappiness they would be alert at once. One particular morning, Anupama noticed those signs and immediately became vigilant. A Deoghari Baba had come down from his dwelling at the Manas Sarovar and was staying at Braj at this time. His camp, built on a platform over the waters of the holy river, was a favourite topic of conversation among the local people. Anupama thought that his coming to Braj at this particular time was a rare opportunity—perhaps he might be able to bring peace and comfort to the tormented heart of her daughter. Eagerly she went to tell Saudamini of the Baba's arrival and then one day, mother and daughter set out for the sandy shores of the Jamuna river. Both were silent as they trudged along.

Saudamini was aware of a peculiar feeling of elation. She wondered what this indicated. Could it be the result of her curiosity? Or was she feeling the same kind of devotion that once made the *gauria bhaishnavs*, devotees of Lord Sri Krishna, forget themselves in a kind of divine ecstasy? Saudamini found that she could not quite dismiss her emotion as an insubstantial and insignificant thing. Every time she looked at the idol in Banke Behari, she had experienced this sensation. Indeed, she had seen at least one other person here in Brajdham overcome with a similar uninhibited abandonment. And this was the aged temple dancer.

A colourful procession would follow Lord Ranganath when he went holding his spear to the Amrakunj during his regular rounds of the Braj country. At such times, that old dancer would come out of her ramshackle shanty near the house where the priests lived. Her wasted and weak limbs would be filled with such excitement and rapture that it seemed as though it was her dancing alone that kept the crowds bemused. This devotion and love was astonishing and unrivalled. It was a completely selfless love that did not differentiate between fortune and misfortunate, the lucky and the unlucky. Every time Saudamini came face to face with this old woman, her eyes filled with tears. Why, she wondered, did these tears flow involuntarily?

Anupama and her daughter walked silently along the dry, smooth sand. They saw a number of huge tortoises climbing up on to the banks. Beneath a large Arjun tree they saw a group of peacocks spreading their beautiful plumes.

They came to the *peepar* pool, and saw that the Jamuna river was not as full as before. The water was starting to dry up and there was a round mass of sand in the middle of the river. They could see the Baba's camp on the other bank. The gathering of devotees was still sparse there, they noticed. Most of the

pilgrims from Panigaon, Raya, Borsona, etc., had already paid him a visit in the morning hours, and those from other places like Ballamogor and Haatras, were still to come later in the day.

It was not possible to cross over to the holy man's camp on the bridge made from empty barrels because there were patches of dirty stagnant water here and there. Climbing up to higher ground, Saudamini and her mother saw that there was a strong current in the deep waters in the middle of the river, and that the boatmen who ferried the devotees across had already tied up their boats and were about to leave. They approached the boatmen and asked whether they could be rowed across to the Baba's camp. The boatmen said that they'd take them across if there were more passengers. Mother and daughter looked back and saw some more people approaching, including the blind female mali of the Govindji Temple and old Gobardhan babu who looked after the stables of Luibazar. Saudamini saw another man coming towards them—the famous artist of Braj, Chandrabhanu Rakesh. He was coming down to the Jamuna banks along the rough and difficult path from Radhabarg. Rakesh sculpted statues in the famous ashtadhaatu metal, sitting under a palm-leaf umbrella in Radhabarg. He had also made beautiful oil paintings of Sri Krishna's Ras Leela which were at Nikunjaban. His ancestors had come from Kalinga and Rakesh would often sit under his palm leaf umbrella talking of his forefathers and of the terrifying days when the Afghans had come down through the mountainous paths of the Hindukush. Only the other day, Acharya Santibhadra had said, "Narasinghadev of the Ganga dynasty was then the king of Kalinga. There was no external trade in Orissa and things were in a bad state. Artists had no roofs over their heads and no food in their stomachs. Painting and the other arts had become a thing of the past. It was during this time that the ancestors of Chandrabhanu had come and taken refuge in some of the ruined temples of Mathura. And the slogans shouted by the invaders, 'Build mosques! Destroy Temples!' echoed and re-echoed continuously in their ears."

Many of these forefathers of Chandrabhanu Rakesh had been massacared in the precincts of these temples. Sitting under the shade of his umbrella, bringing to life the exquisite form of Radha, the consort of Lord Krishna in the ashtadhaatu he used for his statues, Chandrabhanu suddenly stopped his narrative at this point. And as Radha's form gained in brightness and beauty, the artist's face became more and more suffused in sadness, as though he knew that in the not too distant future his beautiful metal statues too would be submerged in the sands of the Jamuna and be lost forever. Just as Akrur Ghat and Chiraharan Ghat, once encrusted with precious stones, diamonds, rubies and pearls that the emperor Akbar had come to see and admire were now mere bits of red stone masonry lying here and there on the banks of the holy river, so too would his handiwork be lost.

In the dry season, in the months of December and January, when the waters of the Jamuna receded far beyond Chiraharan Ghat, the banks of this sacred

river looked completely different. The ruins of ancient monuments that had been destroyed on the whim of man, or of nature, which had lain submerged in the river during the rainy season, now became exposed and looked terrible, littered with the shells of dead tortoises, the half burnt chadors of the married women who had been cremated there, and other similar gruesome things…

"Is everyone here?" the boatman shouted. "Hurry up, the western sky is filling with clouds."

Another group of devotees could be seen coming down along Chiraharan Ghat. But they were still quite far away, and the boatman calculated that he had enough time to ferry this group across and be back to get the new group.

As the boat neared the other bank, the Baba's camp became more visible. A few temporary sheds had sprung up beneath the sannyasin's platform, and these were crowded with devotees. Some volunteers from among the Baba's retinue went out among the crowds in order to look after their needs. As the newcomers alighted from the boats, the area reverberated with cries of "*Jai, Yamunaji, Jai!*"

As everyone sat on the bare sand waiting for the Baba to come out on to the platform, an old man shouted, "Baba, please come out and let us see you." Immediately the entire crowd shouted, "Baba, please come out. Please let us see you."

The Baba came out from his small room. He wore no clothes. His body was naked. His tangled hair was the colour of dry sand. As he came out from his cave-like room he looked more like an animal from the wilds than a human being.

The crowd of people knelt down on the sand. Then, after a while, the devotees stood up one by one and began relating their woes and misfortunes.

Some of the Baba's disciples went around the crowd with large cane plates collecting offerings, mostly of fruits, which they then placed in front of the sannyasin. Pronouncing words of blessing, he threw the offerings back down to his devotees as prasaad and the pilgrims enthusiastically caught whatever they could. The holy man now became aware of his nakedness and so covered himself with a deer skin. A short while later as he was preparing to go back inside his room, a loud lament arose from someone among the crowd, shocking not only the Baba but all the people assembled there.

A thin old man stood up, holding on tightly to one of the platform pillars, wailing.

"Why," the people started murmuring, "he is the old man who makes the *tomal* leaf packets at the Ramgopal Temple! What can be the matter with him?"

Someone in the crowd said, "He has cancer."

Again the old man cried out, "Baba, my children are still very young. They will have to join the line of beggars at the Rangaji Temple after I die. Please

help me!”

The old man flopped down on the sand and began to cry.

The Baba stopped. He became quiet. The devotees were overcome by a peculiar sensation. After a moment of total silence, he picked out some fruit from a corner of the platform and tossed them to the old man. The sick old man was deeply gratified. This was more than he had expected. He bent down deeply in obeisance so that his head touched the sand in reverence and gratitude. As the holy man was about to enter his room again, a loud pleading voice rent the air and he was compelled to look back.

Saudamini was stupefied. It was Anupama.

“Baba” she was pleading. “Please do not go. You must hear my prayer, you must.”

She got up from among the crowd, and went forward. Her whole appearance had altered. Her eyes were bloodshot and her entire body trembled with emotion. Pointing towards Saudamini she almost shouted out the words. “Master, I want nothing for myself. But this girl, Master, please take responsibility for this girl. Destiny has placed this responsibility on my shoulders. But I am afraid that I may not be able to guide her along the right path. I am afraid, Master, I am desperately afraid!”

Murmurs rose among the crowd: “Is she a widow? If she is, she will have a long and tough time ahead. She is very young and there is no dearth of wicked and licentious people in Braj…”

Someone admonished, “Keep quiet. Baba is blessing her.”

Baba said, “True, she is living in the midst of human wolves. But that does not matter. Do you not remember Sita? Circumstances placed her too, in the midst of wolf-like wicked people. But not one of them dared to touch even a hair of her head. Remember, you are your own friend or foe, and also your own loving mother. Every man is the maker of his own destiny. Now go. The western sky is getting clouded and the boatmen are restless to leave. Go back to your homes.”

The devotees knelt down to pay obeisance to the Baba and prepared to return. Looking back as she climbed onto the boat, Saudamini saw that the holy man and his disciples had gone inside the rooms on the platform. Looking back a second time, she saw that there was one person still standing there, leaning against one of the pillars of the platform. It was the thin figure of Chandrabhanu, the sculptor.

Someone shouted from the boat, “Rakesh, come back.” But the artist did not pay any heed.

“Come back, you will not get a boat after this,” someone else shouted, while another joked, “Never mind, he knows how to swim.”

Rakesh, however, did not stir.

One of the pilgrims spoke, “The artist has been somewhat absent-minded for the last few days.... Do any of you remember that incident the day Harekhawala Baba’s dead body was brought to the banks of the Jamuna? His disciples and devotees started tossing bronze and silver coins among the beggars who had collected there. And that day, sitting at the Chiraharan Ghat, this same artist drew a picture of the beggars fighting and clamouring for the coins and even for the Baba’s body. Those beggars were more like vultures fighting over pieces of meat at a butcher’s stall, than human beings! It was a horrifying picture, and I remember that I advised him to tear it up.”

“Yes, it really was a horrifying painting,” said someone.

Another pilgrim remarked, “There are very few customers in his shop these days. Have you noticed how long he takes to sculpt just one of his ashtadhaatu statues?”

“The market for those metal statues is not so good nowadays,” someone commented. “It is not Rakesh alone who’s facing a problem. Most artists do not have a roof over their heads. Come on, let us leave. We should not wait any longer for him. The weather is turning bad.”

One by one, the pilgrims climbed into the boat. Anupama’s mind was filled with a strange sadness. In reply to her heartfelt pleading, the Deoghari Baba had only cited the story of Maithili. Hundreds of such women were born in the world and the land of Braj was flooded with tales of numerous such Maithilis.

No one thought that it would start raining so soon. The wind had increased and one of the men said that it would be advisable to stop the boat at Bangshibot, instead of going all the way to Kesighat. Suddenly, large raindrops started falling noisily on the sandy banks of the Jamuna and as soon as the boatman tied his boat at Bangshibot Ghat, the passengers jumped ashore and ran for shelter. Saudamini and her mother took shelter inside a dilapidated building nearby. The Baba’s camp became hidden from view as the rain poured down in torrents and formed a curtain of invisibility. The gate keeper of the Balabhadra akhara who was sitting with a group of devotees in a corner of an old building remarked, “Indeed, the rain has suddenly burst upon us, completely out of season.”

Another replied, “It is all for the better. Have you not noticed how the earth was drying up?”

Someone else commented, “The water melons on the banks of the Yamuna should be very good this year, then.”

“Yes, the old radhesyamis will be able to appease their hunger with water melons this year,” joked another pilgrim. “Why should they look for any other food when water melons are sold at twenty for one paise!”

“You are right! Some of them eat such large quantities of the fruit that they will sit on the steps of the crowded temples and die of indigestion and vomiting

in full view of the pilgrims and thus gain their sympathy."

"And even as the dead bodies lie there waiting to be cremated," said Balabhadra, "two groups of those notorious body carriers will start fighting for whatever money or other items the poor old women might possess. They don't hesitate to resort to blows, I have seen some of their blows falling on the dead bodies too! But who cares about such things in Braj?"

"Yes. The things that happen at Braj! And this is the holiest of holy places! The centre of the universe!"

These people sitting crouched together, looking more like sacks of flour than human beings, cackled with laughter at their own words.

The rain stopped at last, and the Baba's platform became visible again. One by one, the pilgrims came out from the shelter of the dilapidated building.

Four

Beharimohan Kunj was located at the exact centre of Gopinath Bazar. There was an ancient temple here and alongside it, an old building. The mysterious Harabari too, was situated in front of Beharimohan Kunj. The entrance to Harabari was a plain wooden door. But behind it was another world. The famous Radha- Damodar Temple was located there and behind the temple were numerous small and dark rooms. The inhabitants of these pigeon-holes were a crowd of emaciated and gaunt old widows who made their living as radheshyamis. The priest in charge of the temple at Beharimohan Kunj hailed from Alamgarh, and he was invariably referred to as 'Alamgarhi'. There was no one to oversee how he ran the temple and he took full advantage of this freedom. It was said that even the fabulous gold ornaments of the deities were not safe from his greedy hands. But of late, some youth of Brindavan had taken up the cause against him and had started keeping a watch on him by spending their evenings sitting and gossiping in the tea stall opposite the temple. In winter they sat right on the temple steps.

These young men had indeed achieved some remarkable things. When a worker of the Chouragi Temple had stolen the deity's ornamental belt, these boys had caught him and hung all the steel chains from the jewelers' shops of Retia Bazar around his neck. They had then put him on a decorated donkey and paraded him around the streets of Brindavan. Alamgarhi had stood on the steps of his temple, and chided them saying that they had all gone to the dogs! But he had been afraid since that day and tried his best to keep those young men sitting on his temple steps as happy and satisfied as he could.

A young widow named Sashiprova used to help Alamgarhi in his temple duties. After some time she had started sharing his room. This was nothing new, and Alamgarhi did not have any reason to fear any reaction from the young boys on this issue. Many priests had kept destitute widows in their rooms before this. Both parties benefitted by this arrangement. The poor women were assured that there would be someone to see to their needs when they died and the priests had their work done and their housekeeping, whatever there was of it, taken care of. But Alamgarhi was not destined to spend many days in this happy situation. One day, without any warning, something occurred that dashed all his hopes of a happy and carefree existence.

It was late in the night. The doors of the temple were closed. The stalls and shops were shuttered down and even those homeless unfortunates, who were compelled to sleep on the roads, were fast asleep. There was just a dim light in a shop facing the temple. The priest however was not asleep, although Sashiprova was sleeping peacefully on the cot near him. Suddenly he heard the sound of horses' hooves approaching the temple and the unmistakable sound of

the wheels of a tonga. The sounds came to a stop at his door. Opening the window and looking down, he saw that a tonga had stopped right at his doorstep. Hurricane lamp in hand, Alamgarhi hastened downstairs and was astonished to see the proprietor of Behari Kunj, Krishnakanta Thakur, known popularly as Thakur Sahib, in the tonga. With him were his forty year old, unmarried daughter, Mrinalini, and his mentally afflicted wife, all looking weary from the travails of their long journey.

Alamgarhi turned to Mrinalini, "How is it that you have all come like this without any notice?" he asked.

"I will tell you everything later," she replied. "First help me with Father. He has been bed-ridden for the last ten years, and is almost blind."

Together, they helped him down from the carriage. Thakur Sahib's long unused, dried up knees creaked as he climbed down. Sashiprova, who had also woken up in the meantime, pulled out her cot so that the tired travellers could sit down. When Mrinalini entered after having paid off the tongawallah and seeing to the luggage, the priest said, "The train must have been very late today. What about food?"

"No, there is no need for any food," replied Mrinalini.

"Then probably a cup of hot tea will help to relieve the cold and fatigue," he said.

While Sashiprova went to rekindle the stove, Mrinalini went to the well to have a wash. After refreshing herself, she came and sat down near Sashi, and asked, "You must be Sashiprova? Someone once wrote a letter to Father asking him to intercede and stop you from offering the Bhog in the temple. You see, Father cannot see, so I have to do everything for him. Truly, I am having a tough time looking after these two."

Sashiprova was surprised but she did not say anything. Alamghri came and sat down near the stove. "It seems from your luggage that you intend to spend some time here," he said.

"Not some time," replied Mrinalini. "We have come bag and baggage. We intend to live here permanently. Have you not heard of our situation?"

"Yes, indeed. We do hear things from some of the pilgrims. But what about your two brothers?"

"Why do you pretend not to know things which you are quite aware of?" replied Mrinalini. "The elder one was killed during the troubles at Maulanapur. His companions escaped in the darkness and one day they came and told us that he had resorted to hooliganism in the name of the party! After he died his body was left on the roads of Maulanapur. I had to go and identify him. I can never forget that day."

Sashiprova was shocked. She had stopped making the tea and was staring at Mrinalini's face.

“I heard that the younger one too had gone astray,” commented the priest.

“He was in the same party,” said Mrinalini. “Sometimes he still comes to visit us in the night. But he looks like a scarecrow, and he is so hungry that whenever he comes I give him all the food I cook for the three of us. As he eats, he says, ‘The revolution is coming, Didi. Hundreds of people will die. You will never have to lament that you have missed out on the good things of life. I am sure that you will see the revolution! That is your great good fortune!’ Alamgarhi, I am very afraid that one day he will come after having killed people.” Mrinalini’s face became pale as she said this, and she looked quite old. The biggest fear of her life was that her brother would turn into a murderer.

Sashi got up and went to give tea to Thakur Sahib and his wife. She came back and the three of them sat down together and drank their tea. For some time, they were silent. Mrinalini was gazing at Sashi as she sipped her tea. Sashi was young and good-looking. She was thinking about the vast difference between her and Alamgarhi.

The priest gathered the three glasses and said, “It is time to make the sleeping arrangements. I will sleep upstairs, and Sashi is used to sleeping on the floor. Our room is clean and you can use that. Besides, I think it is almost morning.”

“I do not feel like sleeping now,” said Mrinalini. “We only need to make up beds for the old couple. It is nearly time for the bells of Sringar Bot Temple.”

Sashi too said that she was not inclined to sleep any more. She had heard the ashram paanda passing that way on his way to the bathing ghats some time ago, coughing as he went.

“Then it is time for you to go to the river also. Good, I will also go with you and take a dip. Here, give me the lamp. I seem to have forgotten everything in the last few years.”

Taking the lamp, she went outside and looked around. She saw the brick well and the broken steps leading to the upper floors and the old neem tree. The stars were still bright in the sky. It was still quite dark, and dawn seemed to be some time away. She thought it probably would have been better if she had slept for a while. But, she doubted whether she would have fallen asleep even if she had gone to bed. Mrinalini’s mind was filled with an unknown fear, and for some time past, she had been overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. She felt like a beast of burden, like an over loaded donkey at the end of her tether!

There were a few small dark rooms to the south of the well. A few old radheshyamis and some baishnavi beggars lived there. Mrinalini saw that all the doors were closed. She heard someone coughing inside. These poor old women could not afford to sleep for long. They had to get to the temple to sing bhajans and they had to be on time. Mrinalini lifted the lamp and looked towards the very last small room. The last time she was here, she had seen an

aged radheshyami living there. She had been so old that two others had to support her to the river for her bath. Yet, despite her age and obvious weakness, she had sat on a cot and told tales of the hapless Sita and of the three hundred satis who lived as the consorts of the wealthy king. And of the goswamis who had saved Brindavan, and the legendary Mirabai, Ballabhacharyya, Roop Sanatan, Man Singh, and so many others. Mrinalini remembered that the old woman had a pet parrot. Sometimes the bird would start cackling with laughter and immediately its mistress would stop her story telling. It seemed to be a sort of signal.

Mrinalini walked up to the last room and was shocked to see that the old, broken door was ajar.

Sashi's voice came, "Didi, what are you doing there in the dark? It is time for us to go back."

"Have the arrangements been made for my parents?" asked Mrinalini.

"The priest has seen to all that. I helped him to bring a cot down from the upstairs room. Now let us hurry otherwise it will be difficult to find a place in the Jamuna! It is Radha Ashtami as you know."

"All right. Wait a minute. I will get my clothes and you can tie them together with yours. I think we will need to take the lamp, too—the lanes are frightfully dark."

"That will not be necessary if we go down through Keshi Ghat. It is not so dark there."

By the time they arrived at the banyan tree near the ghat, dawn was breaking, and there was a dim, rather damp light. They saw that there was already a gathering of bald-headed, emaciated widows.

Sashi warned, "Wait. Go down carefully here. There is a very dangerous place here."

"What do mean, dangerous?" asked her companion.

"People say that this part of the Jamuna is possessed by evil spirits and many have lost their lives here. The female gardener of the Borsana Temple too, died at this point only two days ago. The condition of her body after the tortoises were done with it is too horrible to describe."

"Then should we not avoid this place?"

"No, don't worry. You see the roots of that old Arjun tree? Go carefully along that way. There! We have crossed the dangerous area! Now, come along."

They stepped on the sand. It was cool and pleasant. The river, too, was still and calm.

At one place, Sashiprova said, "Sister, this seems to be a convenient place" and without waiting for an answer, she started taking off her clothes. When she was done, only a thin chaddar covered her body.

Then she asked, “Didi, are you afraid to come into the water? Come, I will help you.” In her almost naked state, she caught hold of Mrinalini and tried to drag her into the river. Mrinalini shrank back at her touch as though a ghost was trying to catch her!

“Don’t touch me like that!” she exclaimed. “And it is almost morning. Cover yourself properly before getting into the river.”

“Why, sister? There is still quite some time before morning. I always bathe like this. I do not have too many clothes, you know….”

Even the semi-darkness could not quite conceal Sashi’s lovely youthful figure and seeing it Mrinalini thought longingly of her own body as it had been twenty years ago.

In a voice charged with emotion, she almost shouted, “Hurry up! Put on your clothes properly before going into the water. Otherwise go to some other place where I cannot see you and have your bath. Let me bathe here alone…. What are you staring at? Go quickly, and let me bathe here alone.”

Sashi went away from there, and for a long time she gazed at Mrinalini from a distance. After this, she found that she could not be at ease with the elderly woman.

The water of the Jamuna was always pleasantly tepid at this time of the day, and Sashi would have liked to spend a long time swimming and paddling about in the river, perhaps till the bells of the Sringar Bot rang for the morning prayers. But the bells had not rung as yet….

In silence, Sashi and Mrinalini changed out of their wet clothes, and made their way back home by way of Keshi Ghat. After some time, Mrinalini broke the silence, “We have lost almost all our possessions now. There is no way we can go back home this time.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sashi.

“I mean that after living off what we had for twenty-five years, there is nothing left now.”

“We heard that your father had joined the Movement?”

“Then you heard wrong. Father was an admirer of the British, full of praises for them. In fact, he sings their praises even now. It is utterly false to say that he joined the Movement. Father was never such a patriot.”

“Wait,” cautioned Sashi. “This is a precarious place. We have reached the bridge made from the empty black barrels, the *peepar* pool, have we not? You had better hold my hand. This is not a good place.”

“Never mind,” replied her companion. “I am not afraid. I thought I heard someone calling out behind us.”

“That is only the doorman. I forgot to wear the haldi-kumkum that he likes me to use.”

“You always apply haldi-kumkum do you?” asked Mrinalini.

“He likes me to use it every day so I try not to disappoint him. Besides, he comes to the river side at dawn every morning in the hope of earning a few paise by selling this.”

Crossing the treacherous stretch of the path, the two of them started to climb the steps. These were at least a thousand years old and some of the old and broken steps were almost buried under the sand.

“This time we have come here to sell Behari Kunj,” commented Mrinalini.

Sashi was stunned to hear this, but she said nothing. Instead she asked, “If you sell the temple, where will you stay?”

“One of the rooms used by the radheshyamis seems to have fallen vacant. Maybe we can use that?”

“What! Stay in that filthy room? Have you any idea how dirty the room was when the old woman died? Even the corpse carriers refused to enter it.”

“That can’t be helped. Besides, there is nothing we can do about it. We are quite helpless. After selling the temple we will have to survive on the money from the Trust fund and the interest. So you see there really is no other alternative.”

Sashi could think of no answer. Her eyes burned. Selling the temple meant the end of everything as far as she was concerned.

“Sashi,” said Mrinalini, “the gates of the temple have opened. I would like to go there and say a prayer.”

“You go ahead, then,” replied Sashi. “I will follow you in a minute.”

It was still quite dark as they went towards the temple. But the ringing of bells and blowing of conch shells for the morning prayers of the various temples reverberated across Brindavan. Usually, these sacred sounds of the early morning filled Sashiprova’s mind with joy, even in the midst of sorrows. But today, she sought some quiet and solitary spot where she could sit and think things out.

Five

Anupama was drained and exhausted after meeting Deoghari Baba. She looked weak and weary, but she could not rest because it was time for the famous eighty-four-*krosh* auspicious *parikrama* of Braj and the paandas were busy with meetings in this regard. The old, discoloured tents had been opened, examined and aired. Men carrying banners of numerous temples had come on horseback and were setting up their ashrams. Every inch of the holy ground of Braj, which had for centuries been trodden upon by hundreds and thousands of pilgrims, would once again be full of people taking part in this great purifying circumambulation of the sacred city. Anupama was determined to participate in it. She was getting so weak that she was sure that she would not get another chance to do this holy parikrama. Hearing Anupama's resolve the radheshyami who brought water for them said, "Lady, you should go in a palanquin. This morning I saw the artist Rakesh painting a number of them."

Anupama smiled. The woman was right. If she went in one of those carriages carried by four strong men, there would be no problem even if she fell ill on the way. She decided to book one of the small, simple palanquins that were used to carry old and sick pilgrims. If she did not hurry, even those would be booked by the lame or handicapped rich pilgrims from Nandigram and Borsana.

Opening the window, she saw that the crowds were increasing. She could see a number of richly decorated banner-flying tongas. It was Krishna Astami, and probably that was the reason for the unusually large gathering of devotees. Suddenly, Anupama sat up. She had to take Saudamini to Banke Behari. It was said that sometimes one's inner self, the door to one's soul, was revealed during holy occasions. But her daughter was so young! Anupama could hardly bear to think of the 'inner mind', or 'the soul's door', of a girl of such tender years. Anupama also thought about the long and difficult route of the parikrama, a route of more than sixteen hundred dusty and difficult miles! Would she be able to stand it? Would she be able to spend three months in tents and buffalo carts?

In due time, mother and daughter started off towards Banke Behari in order to watch the Nanda Utsav celebrations. All the streets and lanes of holy Brindavan were full of pilgrims from many places like Haridwar, Dwaraka, Ayodhya, Lathaban etc. The begging bowls that the rows upon rows of lepers held were full of coins.

The celebrations had already started by the time Anupama and her daughter arrived there, and it was impossible to enter the precincts of the temple through the Lion Gate. Even the place for keeping shoes was full of people. Looking around, Saudamini suddenly noticed a pair of eyes looking intently at

her mother and herself, seeing their helpless condition. She knew those eyes but could not place them immediately. Then she realized that she had seen those eyes in the Mathura Cantonment station.

Pushing through the multitude, the paanda Charanbehari came and stood in front of them. “If you stand here like this, you will not see anything,” he said. “Come, follow me.”

Pushing through the crowds again, he took them through a small lane, and climbed up to a verandah. There were comparatively fewer people here; just the families of some paandas of the Gautam clan. The verandah was so strategically placed that everything that was taking place in the temple precincts below could be seen clearly without any obstruction. Charanbehari said, “None but the temple’s own priests are allowed in here. This place was kept for my family. But they could not come, so you can sit here and watch the festivities without any interference.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” said Anupama.

“Don’t say that,” replied the paanda. “It is our duty to help you. And when you go back, you do not have to go through the crowds. You can take the path through this temple and go out by the Madan Mohan Temple. “

Large quantities of oil and water were being poured over the courtyard of the temple. The whole place was getting so oily and slippery that there was no telling where one would land if one happened to slip. Then the festivities started. A gorgeously dressed paanda read out a proclamation in a loud and sonorous voice: “This time, Ramnivash Sethni has been given the great privilege and honour of tossing the gold necklace into the courtyard of Banke Behari. The winner will be awarded a gold coin engraved with the pictures of Bhagwan Sri Ram and Mother Sita, in accordance with a tradition started by Emperor Akbar.”

A murmur of anticipation arose from the crowds and Anupama asked a lady standing near her, “Is the Sethni from Braj?”

“I do not know,” the lady replied.

Another lady sitting nearby said, “Yes, she lives in Braj. She is very religious and charitable. At every Madan Utsav, she distributes blankets to all the radheshyamis and widowed beggars, with her own hands.”

A shot was heard and all eyes turned towards the courtyard. The Sethni bowed towards Banke Behari and threw a semicircular gold necklace with great force down into the slippery courtyard. At once, some bare bodied young Brahmin boys who had been waiting there ran into the courtyard and started struggling to get to the necklace. But, like the competitors at the Lokhar mela at Rangaji, they would go only a few paces before sliding and slipping back to where they had started! The boys were crawling on all fours, so they looked exactly like monkeys! It seemed impossible that any of them would even get

near the necklace, let alone pick it up! There was such a lot of good-humoured laughter and loud encouragement that one could not even hear what one's neighbour was saying! After some time, the young contenders started panting with their vain efforts to get to the necklace.

The lady standing next to Anupama said, "They have been pouring oil and water over the courtyard for the last three days. I don't think anyone will be able to get the necklace."

The competitors were fortified with cool drinks made from the sacred water from the sanctum sanctorum of Banke Behari. Then, after a little rest, the game started again. This time, however, before the spectators were even ready to start cheering, the young son of the Gyan Godari paanda shot forward like an arrow and snapped up the necklace, and shot back to his former position clutching the prize.

There was thunderous applause from the huge throng of spectators. Seeing that there might be a stampede, Anupama thought that it was time for them to leave. By the time they pushed their way through the excited crowds, they were exhausted. The lepers were almost trampled underfoot but they continued to sit where they were. Anupama and Saudamini found, to their relief, that the gate of Madan Mohan Temple was open. Charanbehari was waiting there.

The three of them started climbing up the old steps. They saw two abandoned gateways that were now home to bats. It looked as though there must have been a number of paths to the temple. But everything was now in ruins and covered with prickly bushes. They came to an ancient neem tree, and Charanbrhari told them that this was the tree beneath which the great poet-saint Tulsidas had sat and prayed. After they had climbed the last step, Charanbehari said, "The bhog must have started, but there will be a big crowd. Rest here for a little while, then we will go and get some of the bhog."

But, in the meantime, the gates of the Aditya Temple had opened. Anupama said to Saudamini, "I will go and meditate at the temple's doorstep for some time. You can go around the temple doing the holy pradakshin."

Charanbehari went inside the temple to get flowers and prasaad, and Saudamini sat down under a flowering tree near the temple. The spot was quiet and not so crowded, and the atmosphere was peaceful. She had hoped that she would be able to spend some time alone here. But that was not to be. Charanbehari followed her like a shadow.

"You can see the beauty of the river from this spot," he said. "Look, the tortoises have come out to sun themselves. Do you remember how I followed you that first day you arrived at Brindavan? I thought that you were pilgrims. I did not know then that you had come to stay here permanently. So you really intend to stay here, do you? There are hundreds of young women like you who come to stay at Braj. Do you know what people say about them? They say they are mentally ill and in need of psychiatric help."

Saudamini did not reply. The chameli flowers with which she had decorated her hair had withered. She wrenched them off and threw them away.

Six

Thakur Sahib's Beharimohan Kunj had not been sold as yet, and his money was fast running out. A few buyers had come, but the price they were willing to pay was nowhere near the actual value, and the manner of their bargaining was almost more than he could tolerate. Every buyer in Braj seemed to be a greedy demon so far as money was concerned. Besides, hearing that the temple was on sale, some old time paandas had taken advantage of the situation and started acting as middlemen. As soon as Thakur Sahib hobbled out to the stairs facing the bazaar and sat down, these paandas came and crowded around him, haggling and bargaining.

Sitting on these stairs, Thakur Sahib came to hear all kinds of things. One day, the young paanda from Radha- Damodar Temple came and said him, "Beharimohan Kunj is located on land belonging to Radha-Damodar, and the temple has paid the land rent so far. So when the temple is sold, the priests of Radha-Damodar will get one-fourth share of the proceeds."

Mrinalini reminded him, "We have just about enough cash to see us through one month. After that, when we have to go and live in one of those small rooms, we will have to survive on money from the Trust. Remember the greed you had for good food, for intoxicants, for drinking? Well, God has seen fit to punish you in your lifetime. Now you will have to live in a dark, dank room, like one of those common, starving devotees. We will not have one single paise in hand after the Annakut festival…"

The atmosphere in Braj was always festive, and soon it was time for the Annakut festival. This was celebrated in a very joyful and festive mood. There was not a single old widow to be found sitting inside her dilapidated room. Every temple in the holy city was showing off its wealth of artistically decorated varieties of food items. And every old woman had to go and pay homage to the beautiful statues of Radha-Krishna that sat in glory amidst all the food! Standing in front of the Govindji Temple, Mrinalini heard a voice saying, "Look, open your eyes wide, and look! This holy sight of Annakut will banish starvation for the entire year!"

She turned to see who it was and saw an old woman in tattered clothes, a woman who probably earned her food as a radheshyami, or maybe by begging in the streets. The poor woman could not walk, but she had been carried by someone who had set her down near the doorway.

The crowds thickened. The majority were starving radheshyamis. Their eyes glinted with greed, and they seemed ready to literally jump on to the huge mountains of food. But the glint did not last long. Like the barren, dry hot earth that is cooled by rain, the ravenous eyes of these famished widows became dim as the hours passed by and the heat of greed dissipated. In a flash of unusual

compassion, their healthier companions had brought out even those old women who lay inside their respective hovels waiting for death and salvation. Indeed, how could the three thousand odd poverty stricken widows who lived all around the holy city, not come out to view this attractive scene? All of them shared the superstitious belief, or faith, that if one could but view this festival once, they would be free from the pangs of hunger throughout the year!

Mrinalini sat down on the floor of the Govindji Temple. Sashi had said that she would like to look at the Gobardhan statue made from cow-dung and mud outside the temple. But she also came and sat down near Mrinalini.

She asked, “Don’t you want to go and see the Radharaman and Radhabhallabh Temples?”

“No. I think I will wait here for the gosti,” replied Mrinalini.

“But ladies from good respectable families do not sit like this,” said Sashi.

“You make me laugh,” replied Mrinalini. “Respectable, indeed! Will people say we belong to a gentleman’s family even when we have to live in one of the temple’s tiny *khupris*? We are no better than beggars now. Beggars who do not have the means to eat two square meals a day. It is very difficult.”

The bells rang out, and the priest came and chased away all but a few who were already sitting, ready with the leaf plates. The *Singha Duar*, the Lion Gate was closed. Mrinalini too sat down with her leaf plate, without bothering about anyone else. As if that was not enough, she shocked the priest by calling out in a loud voice, “This is not enough, give me some more.”

Soon all the other women, the starving radheshyamis, also started shouting, “Give us more. Why do you fear that Govindji’s store will be finished?”

The priest snapped at them, “Go, go away, all you old women! It is no good sitting here like this. Go to Radha-Damodar, otherwise the food will be finished there, too.”

Hearing this, the women started to gobble up whatever they had on their leaves. The radheshyami sitting next to Mrinalini asked one of her companions, “Do you know what bhog they are offering in Radha-Damodar today?”

“Bundia laddoos and puris,” the other woman replied.

The women hurriedly finished their food and left.

Mrinalini said, “I had thought of visiting all the temples today. But I don’t feel like going anywhere else. I would much rather sit quietly in some comfortable place here.”

Sashi was happy at this. She had started feeling somewhat embarrassed.

“You look like a very sensible and innocent girl” remarked Mrinalini. “If you had not chosen to live as you do with Alamgari at the temple, you could probably have had a good life.”

Sashi did not raise her head. “I had no other way,” she said. “But Alamgari

has not harmed or spoiled me in any way. There are many women like me in Braj, who live with priests or paandas in the name of Jugal Upaasana, worshipping the Divine as a couple. Women who have no one in the wide world to call their own, women who live in constant fear of their bleak futures. You won't understand these things. Only those who have experienced what we have can understand."

"Then Alamgari has not harmed or spoiled you?"

"I understand what you are trying to say," replied Sashi. "One day, he asked me to disrobe completely in front of him and I did. He scrutinized my body thoroughly in the light of the lamp. Then he put out the lamp and went and slept in his own bed."

"So Alamgari did not harm you, could not harm you," commented Mrinalini.

Saudamini had thought that maybe her mind would undergo some change as the days passed. But it did not happen. She did all the work of a nurse ungrudgingly, and unhesitatingly, bathing the sick pilgrims during the parikrama, and sometimes even picking up some extremely sick people from filthy places and carrying them. She went with Dr Roychoudhuri to a place near Lalaji Temple, where a man lay dying under a tree and looked after him. Since this man could not move he always called out to the radheshyamis going for their bhajans, "Ladies, please give me something."

One day, Saudamini went to this man with her father and after washing his bruised feet, she offered him some food. He yelled out, "No, Ma, do not try to save me. I have come a long way in the hope of dying in Braj. Do not try to save my life now. I will die here and mingle with the holy dust of Braj." The man died soon after. She saw another man lying on the floor of the horse stable at Lui Bazaar waiting for death. Roychoudhury examined him and found that he was dying due to lack of food and medical treatment. That was the first time Saudamini saw a man dying of starvation. For the first few days, Saudamini worked with the doctor in a sort of intoxicated fervour. She felt as though this work of saving lives was fulfilling.

For two long months she accompanied her father to all sorts of places. Places that were most likely to be filled with sick or dying and destitute people. Looking for those who were in dire need of their services. There were innumerable half dead and starving persons, who had come from long distances, and were waiting to die here in sacred Braj. Many of them had just the money required for their last rites tied to their waists. These were the poorest of the poor.

One day, after a long time, Saudamini found time to go and bathe in the Jamuna. The sun was so hot that even the guard had left the river bank and gone to find shelter. Just two or three groups could be seen scattered about. These were people who had come to the river to make the ritual offerings to

God or to their dead. Seeing Sashiprova standing alone near the *peepar* pool, Saudamini walked up to her and said, “I have wanted to sit and talk alone with you for a long time. But I did not find time for it.”

They went and sat in a deserted corner of the pool. Some flowers and other things that people had offered as arpan, had floated down the river and collected in the corner and groups of small silvery fish gathered around these, sparkling in the sun.

“This is the best time to bathe,” remarked Sashi. “There are very few people around.”

Saudamini nodded, and both of them got up. They changed out of their clothes. and got into the river, and splashed about contentedly for some time.

After they had climbed out, Sashi suddenly asked Saudamini, “Tell me, have you really found any peace after coming to Brajdham? I mean, have you been able to come to any conclusion about how you will spend the rest of your life?”

Saudamini did not have an answer. Her companion said, “I knew that you would not have a reply. I too have been plagued by uncertainties for some time. I hear that you have gone through a great deal of sorrow and suffering. Tell me, how do you propose to live out the rest of your days?”

Saudamini tried to avoid Sashi’s question, and concentrated on drying herself and changing out of her wet clothes. In the meantime a few people who had come to perform the tarpan had collected nearby and an old man was digging at the roots of an old Arjun tree.

“What is he digging for?” she asked.

“Snakes,” replied Sashi.

Sashi laughed, and repeated, “Yes, snakes. Then he will go around letting the snakes into peoples’ homes. Later, when the snakes are found, he himself will go as a snake charmer, find the reptiles and take money as reward for his good deed!”

“You did not answer my question,” said Sashi.

“What answer can I give? There is no answer,” replied Saudamini.

“Have you not yet come face to face with Brajachandra?”

Saudamini looked down and kept quiet. Then suddenly, she started speaking in a heated manner, “All right. Listen to me carefully. I am telling you frankly. Follow the truth, and lose yourself in the truth. That is the ultimate truth of my life.”

Kneeling down on the sand, Sashi said, “I have been plagued by an unwonted pain and mental suffering for some time now. You must know that the temple will be sold in a day or two. For a long time I have spent my days serving the temple’s Lord Damodar. Now I will have to live with Alamgari as his mistress. We have not been married, but we will have to live as husband

and wife. Can you imagine anything worse than this? Some old women who can no longer sing bhajans as radheshyamis often live like this, hoping that the man will provide for their last rites, or out of fear. But me?! No, you will probably not understand these things."

"But you can still get married," consoled Saudamini.

Sashi almost shouted out the words, "Alamgari is an eunuch! This is not the end of the world for me. But the problem is that I have started to fall in love."

Sashi's voice became choked with emotion. Then she grasped Saudamini's hands in her own, and sobbed as if her heart was breaking.

Seven

The bhajan ashram was thronging with radheshyamis. Even those old ones who now tried to sustain themselves by begging at the gates of the temples had come and taken their seats on the temple steps. Sherafi Sethni had come to distribute clothes. Sashi too came and sat down with them. She heard the gomasta, the revenue collector, saying to the Sethni, " Do you know that they sell the clothes you give them, at a lower price and then they go and sit near the *peepar* pool and start counting how much money they have collected towards their *Ouddha Dehik,* their funeral. If you see the way they sit there with their skeletal bodies, their sunken eyes glinting with greed, you will think they are truly a group of spirits."

Sashi sat on a deserted step a little distance away, listening. She wished she could talk alone to the Sethni, but there was little chance of it. Almost everyone in Braj knew about this wolf-in-human-shape gomasta, and they spoke sorrowfully about the way in which he had traded some younger and good looking radheshyamis.

Sashi came and stood on the road with the intention of returning home. Again her heart throbbed with pain as she thought of what lay ahead of her. Dear God, she pleaded silently, please don't let anyone else be in my position. Don't make anyone as lonely and vulnerable as I am. Her father had lost his life during the partition of India, and her mother had not been able to survive the famine that had hit Braj years ago. Conditions had become so bad that the villagers had to survive on the roots of the melon plants and other edible leaves. One day, her mother had vomited blood and that was the end of her life.

The streets of Braj had become her home and she grew up there. She said, "Even as I lay starving in the bylanes of Bonkhandi, I prided myself on my virginity. And even now that secret pride brings me pleasure. I do not worry about what people may say about me. But time is passing. And now, another misery is eating my heart out."

"I believe you and I can understand your feelings. But what will you do after the temple is sold? Will you continue to live with Alamgarhi?"

"Only if there is no other way out. Sherafi Sethni is coming soon to distribute blankets to the radheshyamis. I will ask her then whether she can find some way out for me."

Both were silent for a while. More pilgrims were arriving. They heard the ringing of the tonga bells and the sounds of horses' hooves.

"Let's go home." They got up to go. As they approached the rath bhawan where the carriages of Rangaji Temple were kept, they saw the elephant

belonging to the holy men of Talbon. Its howdah was beautifully decorated, and the elephant had jasmine garlands round its neck.

"Today, the pious men of Banakhani will do the holy parikrama," remarked Sashiprova.

Gopinath Bazaar was practically deserted now, and the only sounds to be heard were the loud voices of the wandering salesmen.

By this time, Roychoudhury's dispensary was flourishing. But he was completely unsuccessful in bringing about any kind of equality of status, even in this place, among the bhangis, the sweepers, and the pious men of Dhir Sameer.

Sashi saw some men who had come across the river to sell kheer. They had sold all their stock and were now relaxing in the courtyard of the Hanuman Temple. She went and sat near them, but after looking at her once, they ignored her and went back to their conversation. Her eyes filled with unshed tears. The sale of the temple was almost final. She had been living peacefully and fearlessly with Alamgarhi thus far. She had been unperturbed as she knew that Alamgarhi was unable to harm her. Nothing other people said had ever touched her or worried her but at the same time, she knew that after all any scandal involving a woman was a disgrace. It was the one thing that people took great pleasure to unearth and gossip about.

She realised that she would be in serious trouble unless she could find some solution within a couple of days. There would be men after her!

All the way back to the temple she reflected on what she could do. She did not have any money. She used to earn a little by weaving garlands of tulsi and doing other odd jobs at Gopichandra Mandir. But, after hearing about the sale of the temple she was not interested in anything. She was well aware that even if she continued in this manner, she would not die of lack of food in this holiest of holy cities. She could line up with the beggars at the bhandars or she could sit at the temples with her leaf plate when bhog was distributed, or she could go with the radheshyamis to the bhajan ashrams and sing bhajans for half a day and earn at least twenty-five paise. So she would never have to die of starvation. But, she needed to be at least twenty years older to live like that! Twenty years later, when her body would be emaciated and dried up, like a mangy street dog, then perhaps she would be able to sit without any resentment or worry at the bhandars! Before she had gone to live with Alamgarhi, she had spent her days with the radheshyamis in the *khupris*. Many a time, she had stood amidst the filth and stench of these tiny dank rooms, and given water as the old women died, or held their hands as they drew their last breath. She would never forget the agony and horror of those days.

After that she had found an unexpected change in herself. Those same people who had earlier looked at her in the bazaars and melas as though she

was a living skeleton, started looking at her with curiosity and something like admiration. She herself became aware that her skeletal looks had undergone a transformation. Some radheshyamis said, “She has changed into a lovely jasmine flower of Braj.”

She walked faster as she approached the bazar. Behari Kunj was full of people and standing on the verandah facing the market, the Govindji’s paanda’s son was shouting and yelling. Today was the last day.

She had spent four long years with Alamgarhi in this temple. Every corner was dear and familiar to her, the dimaru tree which bore the brunt of the monkey menace, the wide courtyard in which one could lie undisturbed and unseen for as long as one liked…

Sashi’s eyes filled with tears as she pushed through the crowds and entered the temple premises.

Eight

The deep and thick forests of Atalbehari Bon, Kewari Bon and Gopal Bon where legend says Yashoda made a gift of cows, and the famous Radhabagh, where Radha herself had planted trees and flowers together with her companions and that most beautiful of all forests, Nikunja Bon, where lovely white flowers seemed to stoop down and bend over to embrace the precious soil of Braj! These bushes blossom with sparkling flowers resembling the nupur, the tinkling foot ornaments worn by Radha. They say that if one listened with faith in one's heart, one could almost hear the enchanting tinkling of a pair of heavenly nupurs echo over all of Braj.

A single blossom of this flower, it was said, could transform acute sorrow and grief to a feeling of intense pleasure. Saudamini too had tried to hear the divine sound of the nupur many times. She thought that the soothing sounds might cure her troubles too. But gradually she came to the conclusion that maybe she was not one of the lucky ones. Maybe she would never hear this cleansing and healing tinkling.

How long, she wondered, could she go on walking around Braj searching for the sick? She was getting restless and depressed. Anupama had failed in all her efforts to induce her daughter to take part in the parikrama. But though the older lady was disappointed in her attempts to persuade her daughter, she did not miss the opportunity to do this herself. And then, one day, she endured all the sufferings and trials and completed the holy circumambulation. On her return, Anupama found Saudamini unhappy and greatly depressed. She saw the dark circles under her daughter's eyes. In spite of this however, Saudamini took care of her mother's needs as she always had, arranging hot water for her bath after her tiring and difficult days, putting all the things in their proper place, laying her own cheek against her mother's to verify that she did not have fever, and so on. In short, Saudamini did everything necessary to make Anupama comfortable after her long and arduous parikrama.

As they were eating, Anupama started describing her experiences. Suddenly, Saudamini sat up straight and looked at her mother's face in such a way that Anupama's words died away. She saw that her daughter's face was full of some kind of extreme mental agitation.

The dispensary was still crowded with patients, and Dr Roychoudhury was still attending to them. Suddenly, without any warning, Saudamini jumped up and ran downstairs, and sitting down on the ground, she sobbed as if her heart was breaking. Anupama walked out to the balcony, and the doctor too rushed out from among the crowds of patients, and stood near her. Saudamini cried for

a while and then became quiet. In a voice choked with emotion, she started shouting, “I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work… I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl, and I cannot pass all my years in serving society like you… I am an independent person, and I fear no one and nothing! If you are thinking that I have changed, then…”

Pointing an accusing finger at her father, she screamed, “You are all hypocrites. You are like butchers.”

Her body jerked restlessly, like a wounded bird. Then Anupama’s voice was heard from the balcony, “That Christian fellow is probably coming here.”

The sounds of her weeping, and banging her head against the wall, drifted downstairs. Anupama cried in outrage and disappointment, and in hopelessness.

Nine

Anyone travelling in the early dawn from Gyan Godari to the thick boundary fencing of Maunidas's place, would think that Braj was nothing but a conglomeration of the ruins of a broken empire. The signs of the appalling bloodshed and terror that Aurangzeb unleashed there four hundred years ago still seem to haunt the place. The ruins of the ancient temples of Gopinath, Madanmohan, Radhaballabh, seem to scream out at the discerning traveller, "That horrendous bloodshed and terror took place not too long ago. Listen intently, and you will still hear the distressed cries of the priests buried under the ruins."

Before dawn had properly broken, Saudamini had gone out of the house and started walking along the banks of the Jamuna, deeply perturbed and bewildered. She had not slept at all, and now, with her tangled hair and rumpled clothes, she looked like a mad woman wandering along aimlessly. Suddenly she knelt down on the sand. She seemed to hear the eerie sound of that fearsome part of the river near Kesi Ghat, a sound like that of a terrifying and strong whirlpool. It was said that truly devoted pilgrims could hear the sounds of the wheels of the chariots of the Brinda sakhis. But all she could hear were those fearsome and mysterious sounds that seemed to resound around her.

After walking around for some time, she came to the gates of the Rangaji Temple. The temple offices were open, and she saw that the officers had started their work. She walked up to the chief officer, and bowing her head greeted him with the traditional greeting, "*Radharani ki jai!*"

All the workers bowed their heads and answered in the same manner.

The old manager glanced at her and said, "You may go inside."

But she replied, "I have not come for a darshan. I have come here looking for a job."

The manager was taken aback. "Work?" he said.

Everyone looked at her, mystified. The old manager asked her how much she'd studied. This put her in a bit of a quandary. Avoiding any direct answer, she said, "I do not want any important job. Anything, assistant to the gomasta of the bhandar or a helper to the cook, anything will do…"

A cashier, who was sitting in a corner of the room, laughed out loud. "We do not employ young women in those jobs. Sometimes, old educated radheshyamis come looking for work, but as far as possible we do not encourage them either. Everything is getting complicated these days. A couple of days ago, two graduates of Braj came seeking the ordinary job of collecting land rent. Yet,

until a few years back, you could count the number of Braj graduates on your fingers—there were so few."

Suddenly, the cashier looked up, "Why, you are Doctor Roychoudhury's daughter, are you not? I have noticed you working with him in his dispensary. Listen to me. You cannot have a better job than that. Go, my child, may God bless you."

Going out again to the Lion Gate, Saudamini saw Charanbehari coming out from the coach house. Seeing her, he greeted her with great enthusiasm saying, "Long live Radharani!"

Saudamini bowed her head in acknowledgement and repeated the greeting.

"It appears that nowadays your days are spent in the dispensary. You are so very busy and involved with your work that you have probably lost your earlier zeal to visit the five thousand temples of Brindavan," he remarked.

That particular moment, Saudamini was very pleased to have come across Charanbehari. She knew that she would be cooped up all by herself in her small dark cell if she returned home now. She had started feeling claustrophobic in there, and thought that if she did not do something about it soon, one day she would be buried alive in there.

She said, "If you are free, maybe we can start right now."

"Then, wait a little while here. I have just put a man to clean the wheels of the rath. I will go and tell him."

The man who was cleaning the bare rath looked up at her, and asked, "So you want to go and visit the five thousand temples of Vrindavan. But why are you suddenly so eager today?"

"It is nearly time for me to return home," she replied.

"You are going away?" Charanbehari almost shouted out the words. "What about all those festivals you have not seen like the boat festival of Rangaji, the Ramlila in November, the Baikuntha Utsav in January, the Brahma Utsav? No, no, you cannot leave Braj without seeing these festivals. You must see Rangaji's rath yatra."

The two of them went ahead. They went past the front of the Gobindji Temple. It was unbearably hot and the red stones of the temple radiated heat. It seemed as thought fiery hot sparks would burst out from the walls at any moment. Silently they walked past Ranganath Gardens, and Gyan Godari, and proceeded towards the Jamuna river. There were some sheets of paper stuck on the ancient walls of Gyan Godari. They were very old and completely dried up. They'd taken on the colour and texture of the ancient *Bhurjapatra* manuscripts. They appeared to be some sort of notices, or posters.

"What are these notices about?" asked Saudamini.

"You might say that these are the foretellers of the blood bath that took place in the courtyards of Banke Behari," replied Charanbehari.

Saudamini tried to read the posters: " The committee in charge of looking after the finances should see that the money donated by the devotees is not misused. We vehemently oppose the way the mandir's funds are being wasted in the name of court cases etc. We will not allow the police force to enter the mandir premises. The various items offered to the deities by pilgrims, like clothes, utensils, gold, silver, and precious gems have never been rightly utilised. Instead, they have always been illegally sold at much higher rates. The beautifully embroidered clothes adorning Radha's statue have been taken away, they have been burned and the gold thread with which they were embroidered has been sold off at very high prices. We trust all people are aware that the burning of Behari Maharaj's palace was an unforgivable criminal offence, and so on…"

There were many more such pieces of paper describing numerous scandalous affairs and happenings. Many of them were comparatively fresh, and had not yet taken on the colour and texture of ancient manuscripts. But Saudamini did not feel like reading any more. They stepped down on to the sands of the river bank. Some creepers had grown here since her last visit to this place. There were no pilgrims here now, engaged in pujas and other such religious rituals so the enormous tortoises had fearlessly crawled under the shade of the bushes.

Charanbehari said, "This is the right time to see a very curious thing here, on the banks of the Jamuna. Look carefully and with concentration, and you will see a unique light rising up from the waters of the river, and gradually engulfing and illuminating the entire area. Look, look carefully…"

"No, no, I am in no mood for such things today…" replied Saudamini.

"I see that you are starting to get depressed and disappointed. That will not do," said Charanbehari.

The girl kept quiet. A few scraps of old paper flew off the wall and rustled in the wind. The man searching for snakes could be heard digging at the roots of the dimaru tree.

"Come, let us go and sit on those steps there. It will calm you. You see those broken steps? Only the other day, a statue of Bhagawan was discovered there. A statue sheltered by seven snake heads holding a beautiful utensil in its hands. This is that famous Dhir Sameer Ghat where Gokulchandra entreated Radha to forget her injured pride and come to him. As the poet Joydev said:

"*Smara garala khnadanang, mama shirashi mandanang,*

Dehi padapallaba mudaram!!" *

Saudamini and Charanbehari proceeded towards the steps. Suddenly, out of the blue, she asked him, "You have lived here in Brindavan a long time. Tell me, has a woman like me ever come to Brindavan before?"

"What do you mean 'like you'?" asked her companion.

Instead of replying, her eyes filled with tears.

“You don’t have to tell me things which hurt you so. I understand you. The few women like you who have come here have aroused my deepest sympathy, and have made me feel sad. And let me assure you, some like you have probably come here…”

“Sympathy! I do not want sympathy. Why, do you not feel any desire for me? People say that I have not yet become like those old and dried up women…”

At one time, Charanbehari had indeed associated eagerly with desolate and loose women. It had been a heady pastime with him very much akin to being under the influence of alcohol. But at this moment, sitting with this lovely young woman, he felt absolutely no physical desire for her. Instead, he saw mirrored in her countenance the face of his young daughter who went around the temples adorned with jasmine garlands.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Saudamini asked him. “Have I really become like an old woman, then? There was a time, not long ago, when men used to praise the grace and beauty of my body. But with the passage of time…. Tell me, don’t you feel any…. You told me a little while back that you perceive an unique ethereal radiance arising from the waters of the Jamuna—a radiance that only you see. I am exactly like you. For some time now, a peculiar darkness seems to be engulfing my entire being and my life… But at times, it seems to me that this curious darkness is more illuminating than light. Believe me,” Saudamini could not continue. Her voice became choked with emotion.

“Then, that Christian man—forgive me, I don’t know his name—was able to give you some measure of consolation?”

Again, Saudamini fell silent. Bending her head between her legs, she started writing frenziedly on the sand “Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Christian”

“Does the memory of your husband give you any stimulation at all?” he asked.

“No, it does not. In fact, I can hardly remember his face now. All that has been wiped out by time. Yet, at times, it seems as though nothing else is real, as though his memory is the only reality…”

“Who, or what, motivates you to live, then?” asked Charanbehari.

“You mentioned that Christian just now. In a way, he is the one who motivates me, inspires me. He is very much there. Yes, he is there! I don’t think I can explain to you what his ‘being there’ means to me. You would not understand. I don’t believe anyone will be able to understand it. I have not actually fallen in love with him. Yet, the very fact of his being out there is motivation enough. But, tell me: has anyone like me ever come to this holy land?”

Charanbehari found that he could not look at her face. An unwonted sorrow

and pain filled his heart. Once again the soft, young face of his own daughter came unbidden to his mind, that lovely young maiden who nowadays went around the temples with fragrant jasmine garlands adorning her neck.

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* Lord, help me forget all the poison, the troubles of the past. Give me the dust of your holy feet as blessing.

Ten

At long last, one day, Beharimohan Kunj was sold. The paandas and middlemen took a large portion of the proceeds as their right and a part of the small amount that remained with Thakur Sahib after all dues had been paid, had to be handed over to Alamgarhi. Indeed, Thakur Sahib could have taken the solid gold jewelry and the gold flute with which his great grandfather had adorned the Radha-Damodar statues. The man who sold the dresses and other things worn by the idols, who sometimes sat and chatted with Thakur Sahib, had often urged him not to give way to sentiment. He had said, "Harden your heart, Sahib, otherwise you will find it difficult to survive. You have to understand that this is no more the Braj of old. It has become so corrupt that people do not hesitate to even snatch the very clothes off the idols and sell them at the market in Mathura."

But Thakur Sahib found that he could not 'harden his heart'. He simply could not make himself take off the precious jewellery and the pure gold flute that adorned the idol. He had for some time past started losing his sense of discrimination—the ability to distinguish between what should be done and what should not be done. This temple was the last remaining vestige of the glorious tradition of his ancestors. His great grandfather had told the family as he lay on his deathbed, "None of you must ever touch the temple, even if you are reduced to a state of having to beg for your living. And never crave after the money from the Trust. It will bring bad luck to whosoever does so."

Thakur Sahib's family had to go and live in one of the tiny dark hovels where the radheshyamis usually lived. During his great grandfather's days, the fodder for the horses used to be stored in this room. The three ill-fated members of Thakur Sahib's family changed a great deal after living for a few days in this small, dark and dank room with no windows or ventilation. They seemed to undergo a strange transformation. The radheshyamis living in the nearby shacks observed that Mrinalini lay awake the entire night, lying on the damp floor. And after some time she started going around like the other radheshyamis, collecting old tins and bottles from the roadside. Soon, the neighbours started whispering to each other that Mrinalini was becoming more and more like her mentally unbalanced mother. She filled a corner of the hovel with tins, bottles and other such useless stuff that she'd picked up.

When they were living in the temple, Thakur Sahib had often hobbled outside and walked here and there, in spite of his impaired vision. Sometimes he even used to go and sit on the steps that faced the bazar. But now he could no longer go outside because his walking stick was useless here amidst the broken bricks, the garbage, and the ruined well. The blind Sahib's walking stick could not help him to climb up the damaged steps leading to the temple, and

he started to spend all his days inside that dark, airless room. Soon summer was upon them, with its blazing heat. The three persons, virtually imprisoned within that hovel, and totally unused to living in this manner, felt as if they were being roasted alive.

The radheshyamis had long become used to this burning heat. They lived completely naked inside their rooms, so they could bear the intensity of the high temperature. Yes, more than three thousand homeless radheshyamis had perforce to adjust to live with the great heat of the Braj summer, lying naked inside their hovels.

But for Thakur Sahib's family, the summer was intolerable. They started behaving like angry, trapped animals. Obscene words were often heard being shouted at each other. One day, the mentally unbalanced Anupama was heard, furiously accusing Thakur Sahib, "You are responsible for all this! Oh, yes! I know all about you and your behaviour. I know which prostitute you went to, and when. I remember everything! In 1966, there were only five cases in Calcutta according to the law against professional prostitution. In 1967, there were nineteen cases. And in 1966, that ape-like Central Minister met the prostitutes in an open meeting, and assured them that police atrocities against them would be stopped."

She went on talking like a very wise and knowledgeable person, and then suddenly burst out laughing.

Then, pointing her finger at Thakur Sahib, she screamed, "I know some more things, in 1962, the men of my motherland drank imported alcohol, 27,68,236 litres of it. Then, during the year 1964–65, it increased to 34,20,748 litres! I am not sure whether I remember the quantity correctly. But I do remember which shop you bought your alcohol from, and when. Oh, yes, I remember that very well!"

Thakur Sahib said in a controlled voice, "All right. Now go and sit outside. There is a cool breeze blowing."

"Ah! You think there is a breeze because you see the neem leaves falling from the trees. But actually the leaves are falling because of all the monkeys up on the trees. Can't you see that ugly monkey with a crooked neck jumping about on the tree? It is that which is making the neem leaves fall, not any wind or breeze."

So saying she went outside to look at the monkeys, and taking advantage of this, Thakur Sahib hobbled to the door and tried to close it against his wife. But, realising his intention, she ran back inside like a ferocious tigress.

"No, you cannot shut the door," she screamed. "Everyone will take poison and die! All, all will go to hell! But what good will it do even if you hang by a rope? Your entire mind is full of sin!"

She again made the blind Thakur Sahib go and sit on his tin chair. And,

sitting on that chair, he was compelled to listen to her half mad tirades against himself.

In a very emotional tone, she now continued, “I knew that God would one day give me the chance to say all this. Long ago, when you were busy with your wine and women, I prayed to God to give me one opportunity, just one chance, to make you sit on this chair and listen to my ‘sweet’ words! I lost my youth a long time ago. You, too, are old, and there is no question now of having ‘sweet’ words between us! I have nothing to feel sorry about now. But I do feel sorry when you claim that you were kicked into Braj by someone.”

Her lips curved into a smile. But gradually, the smile turned into a sob, and she started weeping and banging her head against the dark walls of the room. Then, picking up the tins and bottles Mrinalini had collected, she started hurling them at Thakur Sahib.

The radheshyamis came out from their hovels, and yelled to each other, “Stop her, stop her! Otherwise, she will kill the old man!”

But not one of them dared to go near the half mad woman. The old women stood there stunned at the unusual scene, clutching each others’ hands in terror and shock! Thakur Sahib’s wife tore off her clothes, and stood naked. But none of the radheshyamis had the courage to approach her….

Eleven

The legendary Godamma herself participated in the procession honouring the great Swamijis, like Jogiraahan Swamiji of Rangaji. Then the famous Navaratri festival started during the month of Aashwin, and Godamma's procession started again from the swarna stambha, the golden pillar.

Sashi and Alamgarhi had stayed together until the end of the Navaratri festival. But after that, she made arrangements to shift to one of the rooms where the Banakhandi radheshyamis lived, and Alamgarhi, too, left Behari Kunj, and went to stay with a spiritualist, who lived in an abandoned house near the Jamuna, who advertised his skill as a fortune teller. Until he could get a new job, Alamgarhi was content to earn his living by taking care of the needs of the people who came to have their fortunes told. But things became progressively more and more difficult for Sashi in her shack in Banakhandi, as a group of idle young men, having nothing better to do, took to spending their time roaming around outside her room, or standing in front of it, waiting for her to come out.

Sashi scanned the crowds eagerly when Godamma was carried in a procession around the garurh stambha. Sherafi Sethni might come she thought. Then maybe she could persuade the lady to employ her to tend to her Gopal. What a piece of good fortune that would be! Every morning during the festival, Sashi stood at the Rangaji doorway. But there was no sign of the Sethni, no sign of her gaily decorated tonga, or her palanquin.

Disappointed and frustrated, Sashi went and lay down inside her room, closing the door behind her. The joyous Navaratri festivities were still not over and she could hear the loud, grating voice of the Raavana of the Ramleela celebrations at Kesighat.

Suddenly she heard another sound, the frightening sounds of violent laughter! She sat up on her bed. The two or three old radheshyamis who had not gone to enjoy the Ramleela were snoring inside their hovels. But most of them, she knew, were sitting in the Ramleela grounds.

Someone came and banged on her door and shouted to her to open the door.

"Who are you?" she called back.

"Open the door, and then I will tell you who I am," the person shouted back.

"Tell me who you are. Otherwise I will not open the door so late in the night," she replied.

"Be careful. I can break your door with one kick if I have to! Listen, I am Alamgarhi's friend. You are in danger. That is why I have come here from the Ramleela festivities, hoping that I can be of some help to you. "

And without waiting for Sashi's reply, the man started kicking at the door. Sashi feared that the snoring old radheshyamis would awaken at any moment now, and if they saw what was happening, they would surely compel her to leave her room in the morning.

She opened the door, and saw an unknown man standing there. "I have come here with Alamgarhi's permission," he said. "We know of your separation from him, but it all depends upon you. I too have come here with a proposal. I mean, I too have a temple, and I want a woman like you to help me in my work. If you accept my proposal, you will have to help me just as you helped Alamgarhi. I mean, if necessary, you will have to sleep with me too. And believe me when I say that a group of men at the Ramleela ground have become aware of your unprotected state and are waiting to take advantage of this situation. But I am a man of determination, and I will not stop at anything…"

A horribly foul smell filled the air as the man spoke, he'd probably had some bhaang mixed with very stale curds!

Snapping his fingers, he shouted at her, "I tell you, if you don't accept my proposal you will repent. You will have to resort to poison! So, before that group of wild dogs come… I am a peace loving man, not a ferocious wolf like them. I am sure that you are well aware of how brutal such tigers can be! They will finish you off completely!"

"The morning puja and darshan must have started at Rangaji by now," he continued after a moment. "It will not look nice if the old radheshyamis see me standing in front of your room. So I will take my leave. But think over my proposal…" The man appeared to be fully intoxicated with the bhang. He could hardly walk straight!

By this time, the procession carrying Rangaji had crossed the Lion Gate, and the sounds of the conches and bells of the morning arati could be heard from the Bangshigopal and Radha-Damodar Temples. Sashi saw the young Swamiji of Rangaji following the procession on barefeet, completely spellbound. Last year, she had stood very near him, she remembered, as he pulled the ropes of Rangaji's chariot! Indeed, she had seen this child brahmacharyya, now a young Swamiji, many times during the past years, at the many religious festivities and celebrations at Braj. Sashi's twenty year old heart and body trembled with an unwonted, heavenly joy and near ecstasy when she saw the young Swamiji. The more embarrassed and hesitant she became, the more her smitten heart cried out for a chance to meet the young sadhu!

The procession went past Chiraharan Ghat and approached the Jamuna. She sat on one of the numerous broken steps and watched enchanted, as the Swamiji collected water from the holy river. The captivating sounds of the shehnai, and of the chanting of prayers resounded through the area. Swamiji came out from the waters and sat down under a huge decorated umbrella.

When, after a while, she went back to her room, she saw two radheshyamis standing in front of it, obviously waiting for her. As soon as she was near enough, both old women started speaking together, “Two men came looking for you, and neither of them wore the kanthi mala, the holy beads priests always wore. They must be a couple of those wild dogs, those idle men, who are always on the prowl for defenseless women.”

Seeing no change of expression on her face, the women asked, “So you will go back to Alamgarhi, then?”

“No, I will not,” she replied.

The radheshyamis were annoyed and displeased. If Sashi continued to live in her hovel here, it would mean that they too would have to put up with the molestations of that unruly and vulgar crowd of idle young men who were known and feared as the wild dogs of Braj. They went away, deeply dissatisfied with Sashi.

Twelve

It was the season for jasmine flowers. A thick fog covered Braj in the early mornings, and the old radheshyamis who could not see well, had to hold each others hands as they went to their bhajan ashrams for the morning shift.

Saudamini had stopped working at the dispensary. She had almost given up her morning dip in the river, and she was not to be seen at the festivals of Rangaji either. Roychoudhuri's reputation as a doctor had grown tremendously within a very short time. When people met him in the alleys and by-lanes, they acknowledged him with heads bowed in respect. His patients increased. So much so that, at times, he had to use the abandoned rooms of the temple. But try as he might, he could not change one thing. He could not make the Brahmin patients use the same water pitcher as the Harijan patients. So, he was compelled to keep two pitchers at a distance from each other.

Also, his hope that life in Braj, and in particular her involvement with his small medical centre, would bring about some change in his daughter was frustrated. He was dismayed and disappointed by her behaviour. Her initial enthusiasm for the dispensary had long since worn off . Yet, Roychoudhury had become aware that, hidden away in some remote corner of her emotions, there was an immense store of human sympathy—sympathy for the deprived and the destitute. The way she had taken and nursed a destitute leper woman and her gentle, sympathetic behaviour towards her was something rare— something he had yet to see in his long medical career.

Instead, the last seven years seemed to have transformed her into a wandering old woman. Sometimes, nowadays, a peculiar emotion assailed her. She was beset by a strangely strong but silent sense of ill will. At times this odd sensation even seemed to rise up and illuminate the soft, silky waters of the early morning Jamuna river! Had anyone else ever faced such unusual and strange senses, she wondered?

A strange and mysterious stillness hovered over the cremation grounds of the wealthy Raja of Bhoj, situated where a few ruins of the two thousand years old Bauddha Bihar, and the creations of the famous artists of Ujjaini, still remain almost hidden from view by prickly shrubs and bushes. Now, only a harsh, yet voiceless distress seemed to resound there and Saudamini sometimes felt that she, too, was somehow mysteriously related with this unspoken yet unmistakable anguish.

It was not that she was unfamiliar with a sense of loneliness and isolation. Indeed, it was only after her marriage with Subroto that Saudamini's ever present sense of loneliness had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, because of love, maybe. And the liberation and strength of love.

But now, not even the smallest trace of that heavenly light of love remained!

And what about that Christian youth? She felt at times that she was heading straight towards a deep and dark tunnel. At the same time, she sometimes also felt that this darkness was more significant than light! She could not understand what was happening to her. Was there anyone else with such a tumultuous and confused mind? Had such a woman ever set foot in holy Braj before?

One morning, a noise like the sound of dry and parched paper being tossed about by a strong wind, woke her up. Looking up, she saw a snake slowly making its way out of the crevices of the broken bricks and wood. Its yellowish body shone in the darkness of the hovel. But, probably smelling her presence, it quickly disappeared into another crevice.

Saudamini wondered whether the glimpse of the snake early in the morning was an omen, an indication of something good about to happen to her. What should she do, she wondered? Should she go for a stroll to the Nikunj Bon, or Lalaji's temple? Her mother had repeatedly warned her not to go out alone so early in the morning. Braj was not a safe place any more, she said. But these days, her mother was alarmed at the slightest thing. Just a few days ago, one of the radheshyamis had informed her that the Christian youth had been seen sitting on the steps of Chiraharan Ghat. Ever since then, she had stopped going for her morning dip in the holy river, and to offer the auspicious bel leaf at Gopeshwar.

In spite of that, however, Saudamini opened her door and quietly stepped outside. Everyone said the same thing nowadays: the safe and secure Braj of old had long disappeared. Now it was filled with wicked, wolf-like human beings, ready to pounce on innocent and unwary victims. She covered her head with one end of her sari. She did not cherish the idea of sitting all alone at this time of the day. An ever-present feeling of loneliness tortured her. This was growing stronger day by day.

Unable to stay still, she walked along the narrow path going past Brahmakund. The darkness of night was already diminishing towards the east. But, as she approached the new Brahma Temple, she stopped short, and pulled the sari end lower on her face. There was a man standing beneath the light post in front of the temple. And a little further on there was another man on the ground, a sick man, waiting for death. He was completely naked and looked like a ghost.

Saudamini pressed herself against the wall and looked at the standing man. She repressed a desire to scream out aloud, the man was no other than her great and heroic father, Dr Roychoudhury!

Roychoudhuri stooped down and examined the dying man thoroughly. And then he did something that astounded her. He took the warm blanket which he had wrapped around himself to ward off the cold and covered the sick man

with it. Then he picked the man up in his arms and strode off very fast towards his dispensary. Saudamini thought that her sixty year old father looked and acted more like a strong youth than an ageing man. Was this man—her father—then, truly a great man? This erstwhile Dewan of the East India Company, Lalaji, this last descendent of the sannyasin, Sambhuram Awasthi?

She came out from behind the ruined wall and walked along. The wind was getting stronger now. Groups of starving beggars had already started to queue up in front of the Lion Gate. It was Friday, and she could easily spend the entire morning sitting in a corner of the temple, or at least until the festivities of the Venkateshwar Tirumanjan were over. But how could she go back to her dark hovel of a room after that? Indeed, if she felt like it, she could spend the entire day roaming around Braj! She was independent now, no one could stop her.

She saw a group of boy Brahmacharis, with begging bags slung on their shoulders. They were facing the east, and were busy with their ritual worship of the sun. They must be students of the Sanskrit school started recently by Swami Brahmananda of Uttar Kashi. Only the other day, this Swamiji had delivered a very powerful speech at the Dharma Mahasabha, the religious conference, in Mathura, denouncing those who maintained that Sanskrit was their mother tongue. According to him, Sanskrit was still the favoured and loved language of Braj.

It was surprising in a way, that, although they were students of the highly reputed and respected Swamiji, they went around with their beggars bags seeking alms. But then why not? The students of Braj's famed Prem Vidyalaya also sought alms and pursued their studies through charity. They also earned coins by reciting the *Ramcharit Manas*, and verses from Keshab Das's *Ramchandrika*. Hearing recitations of extracts and verses from such religious and spiritual texts like these chanted by students of reputed Sanskrit institutions, were rare treats for the inexperienced devotees and pilgrims, and the students returned with their alms bags full of coins and flowers.

Saudamini noticed that the clothes she wore were getting frayed and realised that they would not last much longer. Dr Roychaudhuri had started pouring almost all his resources into his small medical centre, and Anupama had recently told her daughter again, "There is a vacancy in Shahji's Girl's School, and Gyan Godari's Laxmibai Balika Vidyalaya might also appoint you if you ask them. Remember, no one has left any fat inheritance for you. The only thing your father will leave for you will be the burden of his beloved dispensary."

Her mother was right, of course. No one was going to leave her any money or any other worthwhile inheritance. Her university certificates must still be lying in some corner of her suitcases. Why had she studied, she wondered? Was it merely because of her enthusiasm for higher degrees, or was it as a precaution against future insecurity? Most girls like her did not think of

answering such questions. She too, had no answer. Sometimes, now, when she was all alone, and all was silence around her, she seemed to hear a whisper in her ears, “Time is speeding past like a winged arrow. Be careful how you utilise it, else it will fly past and leave you behind in the tangled and spiky bushes of bygone days!”

She debated whether she should wait for the Tirumanjan festival, when two and a half maunds of milk would be poured over the idol of Venkateshwar. But she had ample time on hand. Children were already crowding the tunnels adjacent to the ancient walls of the temple. The milk poured on Venkateshwar would literally cascade down that way and the children would be able to collect quite a lot of it. The crowds of beggars, too, were already scrambling for the best places.

Saudamini stood up and started walking towards the river when she suddenly thought of the artist Chandrabhanu Rakesh’s work place. It would be better to spend time there, she argued to herself, than to roam aimlessly along the sands of the Jamuna, crowded as it was with the unkempt radheshyamis.

She found a group of foreign tourists sitting on the floor of Rakesh’s room. The young man who was training under him was sitting in a corner of the room, engrossed in his own work. The foreigners were full of enthusiastic questions like, the place of Braj in the Bhakti movement, the appealing and delightful worship in the devotional literature of Ram bhakti, Aurangzeb and Braj, Tuslidas and Mirabai in Braj etc. They had so many questions!

Once Mirabai had asked Tulsidas, “Have I not sinned by leaving my husband?”

Tulsidas’s famous response to her was “Bhakta Prahlad left his father, Vivishan left his brother, Bharat, his mother, Bali his Guru. But all of them gained in virtue by it. So why should you think you have sinned?” But twentieth century pundits have started to suspect even this meeting of Tulsidas with Mirabai! But no old timer will give any credit to such so called pundits of today, no matter what proof of erudition they seek to give in support of their suspicions.

One of the foreigners said, “Perhaps he wanted to do research on Braj.”

“Then what should we believe?” asked another.

“Braj is almost entirely under the sway of the great poetic literature the Gayatri, of Krishnageetawali Barwoi Ramayan of Janaki Mangal.”

But the foreigners were not content with this. They were curious about many other things, like Braj in the days of the East India Company, Akbar and Braj, the wealthy and powerful zamindars and their relations with Braj. And they wanted to hear the stories of those devout prostitutes who helped in constructing some of the temples and other holy places of Braj, more than two hundred years ago. They wanted to rediscover their almost lost existence.

After squabbling for some more time, the foreigners left Rakesh and strode off towards the bridge built from empty barrels. Most of them were bare footed, their hair long and unkempt and their faces deeply sunburnt. The bags slung across their backs were full of books and a few essential clothes. After they had left, Saudamini went and stood near Rakesh.

"I saw you sitting under that kadam tree," he said. "There were some peacocks dancing there before you arrived. When you wear jasmine garlands and roam around the temples, you look like a devout young girl," he continued irrelevantly.

Saudamini looked down and said, "Thank you. It is a rare treat to get a compliment from an artist."

Rakesh shouted at someone inside the house, "Radhe, bring some tea." An old radheshyami opened a window upstairs and looked down. Saudamini had noticed this same old woman the last time she was here.

As he got his things ready for a new painting, Rakesh questioned her, "How much longer do you plan to stay here in Braj?"

Saudamini did not reply. Indeed, what reply could she give? She, who herself did not know what she planned to do even the next day. The artist studied her keenly, trying to read her face. Each seemed to be trying to gauge the other.

Then he spoke, "You are an educated girl. If you are thinking of making Braj your permanent home, you could try for a teacher's post in Shahji's school."

This time, too, there was no reply from Saudamini. The radheshyami came in with the tea, and the student sculptor who was carving a statue of Radhika, stopped his work and joined them for a cup of tea, too.

"So you have been eating two proper meals these days," commented Saudamini.

Rakesh laughed. "The creative arts suffered an unprecedented decline during the tenth century," he said. "And the creative artists were reduced to the state of having to beg for their livelihood. Today, most of the unknown artists are in the same position. They are compelled to queue up in front of the Lion Gate, for alms. There is no one today like the fifteenth century Mamud Begra who welcomed the Rajasthani style artists and established them at his own cost. There is no one like Humayun either, to carry books full of paintings even to the battlefield! Of course, one or two rare genuine lovers of the arts do appear even now. For example, the other day, a lady from a respectable family arrived in a hired tonga. She introduced herself as a descendent of the famous Rao family of Maharashtra. I know the story of the Raos. They had a vast park here in Braj, called the Kadamkhandi. Now there is no sign of the park. This lady wanted two pictures in the Mughal style—just two paintings—in exchange for all her property here!"

“You seem to be in a very good mood today,” said the young sculptor who was working with him.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Rakesh. “I feel good whenever I remember that lady. She said that she knew all about me, that I was the last representative of the Mughal style. The poor lady obviously did not know the story of Ishwari Prasad. Only the other day, an artist came near the Lion Gate and proclaimed, ‘If you want to see the last representative of the Moghul style of art, go to that narrow lane in Kashi.’

“That bearded old man, haggard and starved, dressed in a dirty and worn out old dhoti, who, uncaring of what others say or do, makes his rapid way along the lane. The best way to recognise him is by his Gandhi cap, and the clean chaddar around his shoulders. He is the last of the painters in the true Moghul style. His unparalleled paintings of Omar Khayyam bemused even Europe’s most renowned artists. And that painter is languishing today in untold poverty in one of the poorest galis of Kashi!”

“Those foreigners told me that we should revolt. Seeing the hordes of underfed, and sick people, the destitute and the dying, all over Braj—around the temples and on the parikrama—they said to me, ‘Why don’t you revolt?’ There was a similar situation around the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Badshahi artists had to come down from the royal courts and go around places such as Kangra, Nurpur, Gwalior, and Braj, with begging bowls. Yes, those foreigners urged me, saying, ‘Why don’t you people rebel?’ Have you noticed the students from places like Mathura, Uttar Kashi, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar, and even from Agra? They are so carefree—as if they have nothing to think about, nothing to worry about. And what about rebellion? Do you know, I truly feel for these foreigners. They have spent the last four nights in the temple courtyards; and for their food, they have joined the queues of the impoverished sadhus. Haven’t you seen them go about on bare feet? They have no shoes. They are hungry, their clothes are tattered. But have you observed their eyes? You never see such hunger, such thirst, for knowledge in the eyes of our pupils. If you do not believe me, go and stand near the doorway of Mathura’s Dwarakadhish Temple and observe the students passing along the road. I tell you, you will be disappointed and disillusioned. You will see their blank, vacant stares, their dry, bronze coloured skins. It is intolerable! And all this talk about rebellion! Last year, I went all around from Tanjore to Bhubaneshwar in order to earn some money. I met many students while I was travelling, and I tried to observe their eyes in the hope that I might see some spark of life, of interest somewhere. But I saw nothing but the same blank looks. Indeed, to tell you the truth, I did once see something like that particular interested look. That was on the streets of Cuttack, in the eyes of two youths. But they were labourers, desperatly looking for work. Any work that would earn them their daily bread. But that unique look in the eyes of such youth is like pearls around the necks of monkeys, is it not?”

The artist Chandrabhanu Rakesh, laughed aloud at his own words. The ashtadhaatu statue the younger sculptor was working on seemed to tremble at this laughter!

The *peepar* pool, the bridge made of barrels, shone in the morning sunlight. The sculptor said, "You are looking energetic and bright today after a long time. This poor lady seems to be waiting to say something to you. But you are totally taken up with your own wit!"

Chandrabhanu said, "You came and sat under the kadam tree so early in the morning today. I do believe you have something to ask me. What is it?"

The sculptor had, in the meantime, finished for the day, and was preparing to leave. The old radheshyami, too, had collected the empty tea glasses and left the room.

Rakesh said, "I hear that Dr Roychoudhury has already won the hearts of the people of Braj with his selfless service. If you wish, you can easily become his successor. Have you ever given any thought to that? Braj needs men like him. You should also try to forget your own sorrows and troubles and become big hearted like him. And prepare yourself, so that you will be able to take charge of your father's dispensary when necessary."

Saudamini's face paled when she heard these words. She said, "If I had been of that mettle, if I had been imbued with that kind of greatness, then probably I would not have had to face such mental torture and restlessness. Believe me when I say that I am a very ordinary woman, with an ordinary, run of the mill, mind. And I doubt that I will be able to do much in the future either. A peculiar sense of distress and depression has dogged me all my life except for one year. For one short year, I was a stranger to that despair, that sense of discontent. Those untrammeled and blissful twelve months are still vivid in my innermost mind. My soul and mind were liberated, and I was free and eminently happy! And today, look at me! I am wandering around here going from temple to temple, seeking peace, trying to get back something of that happy year. But, the days are flying past, and here I am—my mind and body getting more and more pale and unattractive—like a bundle of old discoloured clothes!"

She continued, "There was a time when I used to enjoy wandering around here and there. Believe me, I feel as though I have passed through many ages and have arrived at this unknown place in an unfamiliar time. Everything has changed. I, my soul, have no connection at all with anything—or anyone—here. There is that sky overhead, that sky I used to be afraid to look at. For a very long time, I could not bring myself to look up at the sky Has anyone else ever faced such a situation? A situation when a person is afraid to even look up at the sky! You are an artist, and you understand feelings, emotions. Believe me when I say that I have seriously analysed myself, and that I know that my zest for life, my emotions, and my passions, and desires have not undergone any change. The other day I saw a young couple. They were sleeping under a

dimaru tree on the parikrama path. There was a peculiar smell in the waters of the Jamuna river, I don't know what the smell was, but it was not at all pleasant, like the smell of newly butchered meat. Something happened to me, I do not know what. That unnatural smell from the river, that couple lying under that tree…. I lay down on the sands of the Jamuna, and started rolling about. At one time, my clothes slipped off . The feel of the sands on my naked body was something very strange, unusual. I am sure you understand what I am trying to say. Even at that time, you understand, I had many golden dreams." Saudamini looked up at the artist, and the corners of her lips trembled with quiet sobs.

Rakesh said, "I had heard that Christian youth could bring consolation to you."

"Listen, I am telling you the truth," she replied. "Yes, he brought me consolation and comfort as no one else had been able to do. I used to wander from temple to temple seeking some relief, some comfort. Nothing helped, until I met him…. No, no! It was not as easy or as simple as that. At times that consolation would be complete, more than complete. At other times, I would again fall back into the darkness of despair. It was peculiar. Tell me, you are an artist and you will understand. Was there ever another girl who had to face such a situation? Has anyone like me ever come to this sacred land of Braj?'

Rakesh stood silent for a moment. Then he looked up and said, "I am sure that you understand, you are my friend and my foe. And you are my fellow traveller, too."

It was getting hotter and the sun was getting stronger. The barrels of the *peeper* pool shone in the sun, looking like wild buffaloes with the sunlight glinting on their backs. Rakesh was a busy man. She stood up to go and said, "If you ever come across anyone like me in Braj, please let me know. I have a lot of questions to ask such women. Believe me, it is necessary for me to know some things."

Saying this she went away, leaving her footprints on the sand.

A young Harijan woman used to come everyday to sweep the cemented area around the roots of the large kadam tree. She came and cleaned it every day so that some unkempt sannyasin could not come and lay claim to the convenient spot, and sit there with an idol he had got from somewhere. She was always alert against such so-called sannyasins. They tried to take possession of places all over Braj, wherever they saw a likely and convenient spot, even the cemented areas around the water tanks of the stables. Rakesh noticed that the young Harijan woman was not sweeping today. Instead she had started dancing around the tree, dancing with abandon, like a mechanical thing.

He was greatly astonished at the sight and did not know what to think. He remembered that this woman had tried to enter Rangaji's temple and garland the idol of Shri Venkateshwar. The security personnel, armed with stout sticks,

had chased her away, and a crowd had run after her, shouting angrily. She was an untouchable, and she had dared to think of touching the holy Lord Venkateshwar and garland him! Someone had even landed a mighty kick on her chest! The poor woman had fallen face down on the doorstep of the coach house. This group of Harijans had come to Braj one day long ago, from the banks of the Tamrapani river. They had come when Kurukhsetra's Parthasarathi, Sri Krishna, had been brought here by Radha and the enamoured gopis, and had stolen the hearts of the people of Bharat. Yes, these 'bhangis', these untouchables, had come and settled in Braj in that distant past. They had set up their colony in a piece of land among the thorny bushes and shrubs on the outskirts of Braj. And they still lived there, as their numbers grew and their branches and sub branches increased.

Gradually the woman danced with more and more abandon. Her hair became loose, and her clothes slipped off her breasts. She whirled around and flopped down on the ground, and started dancing representing the various mudras, like the naras mudra, the dhanu mudra, the padma mudra, etc. She danced all the one hundred and sixty mudras. Her ancestors must have been devotees of Katyayani Devi of Braj. After some time she stopped and asked the radheshyami who worked for Rakesh, for a drink of water. The older woman jumped up in anger.

"You live and work like a prostitute, and you dare to ask me for a drink of water! Control yourself and arrange your clothes, cover yourself properly. In the old days, women like you were thrown to the mercy of lustful young soldiers!"

Greatly annoyed, Rakesh said, "That's enough. Keep quiet and give the woman some water and let her go on her way."

The woman seemed to come to her senses. Hastily, she tried to arrange her clothing and cover herself.

Where was she? What had happened to her? Had she fallen into a trance, like the legendary Mirabai? The one and only purush in Braj was the flute playing Lord Sri Krishna. All else was prakriti.

"Here, take your water."

"Believe me," said the young bhangi woman, "I do not know what happened to me. I was not aware that I was dancing here in front of you, almost bare-bodied. Please forgive me."

"Are you married?"

"No, I am a widow."

"Do you not want to marry again? It was said in the ancient times, it is written in the *Rigveda*, that a god named Bishwabasu enjoys women like you. This god was prayed to and meditated upon. He was told that he should desire only that woman who had not lost her feminism, who lived in her father's

house. That is your bhog."

"Here, take this water."

"Pour it for me. I will not touch your vessel."

"Everyone in Braj knows that I do not believe in caste etc. Artists have no caste or creed."

"Then, forgive me."

She got up, but as soon as she started to go towards the river, he said, "All right. Cup your hands and I will pour the water for you. You are like persons afflicted by the maza disease… That is why even great men like Ramananda, Jayashi, and Kabir, were never at peace."

Rakesh was smitten with a strange sense of sorrow for this woman cupping her hands in front of him for a drink of water. After drinking her fill, she wiped her face, and said in a voice full of gratitude, "You are a good and simple man. Such persons are rare in Braj."

"So you are set on following the path of the old dancers of Rangaji. I mean, you have decided to make the sword and the Lord your companions."

The young Harijan woman smiled. "I was skilled in the mudras that please the Devi. I was skilled in all the one hundred and eight modes of intertwining the fingers during worship. I danced them all, all alone, since I did not have the right to enter the temple and garland the goddess with my hands. Just as the Gopi Balika fell at the feet of the Devi in order to get Brajachandra, I, too, knelt at Her feet for the well being of my husband. My husband died. And ever since then, the goddess Katyayani has blessed me, and I have found my Lord Brajachandra. He takes His pleasure in Braj. And listen, he also takes pleasure in me! See, here are the marks of His lips on mine!"

"Takes his pleasure? What do you mean?"

"You told me a little while ago about the god, Bishwabasu. One day, a devotee earning his living sitting on the Atilla hills and telling the stories from the *Puranas*, came down to the bhangi colony. He told us that love is not simply a matter of pleasing the eyes. It is a matter fraught with feelings and thoughts. He said that he had found this truth after studying both the *Puranas* and the *Vedas*. Both these great writings say the same thing, he said. My husband used to enjoy me and take pleasure in me. And now, Gokulchandra takes pleasure in me in the same way. In this way, with His protection, He has made my life worth living. Otherwise, you tell me, Sir, what was the difference between life and death for me?" Her eyes brimmed over with unshed tears, but her lips smiled. Without waiting for the artist's reply, she went off quickly towards the Shahji Temple lane.

The sun became very strong. Some enormous tortoises came out of the river and moved slowly up the river bank. The group of foreigners could be seen in a boat in the distance, going towards the other bank of the river. Someone

seemed to whisper into Rakesh's ears: "This is the right time. Men enjoy this very valuable lifetime only once. There is still time. Go forward! Do not waste any more time. Go, go, you son of the immortal nectar!"

What happened to Rakesh, all of a sudden? Only a little while ago, he had seen all those hundreds of footsteps on the sand, and now, in one quick moment, a gust of wind came and wiped away all the footsteps. The footsteps of the bhangis, the foreigners, the radheshyamis, and the numerous devotees, were suddenly covered as though with a white sheet, like the white shroud of a dead body. Rakesh stood still and stared, like one stunned and hurt. Everyone, irrespective of caste, colour or rank, Bhangis, Chamars, and Brahmins alike, were covered under the same soft white sheet.

Thirteen

Finally, Sashi started looking for the Sherafi Sethni like one possessed. The radheshyamis she lived with had started abusing her, saying that she was like a piece of raw meat, easy prey for the vultures that were closing in on her. They told her that they could not let her stay with them any more. Her clothes were also almost in tatters now and it was imperative she find the Sethni and ask for her protection.

It was Ekadasi, and a Sunday. Braj reverberated with shouts of '*Jai, Radharani jai!*' invoking Radha, the empress of Braj. It was almost impossible to get a tonga through from the bazar to the temple. It took Sashi half an hour to go from Harabari to Mandi, the crowds were so thick! Today there was no foul smell from the filthy drains of Vrindavan. Instead, jasmine and perfume fragrances filled the air.

Groups of paandas filled the roads. Today, they wore spotless white uttariyas on their upper bodies and had twined jasmine garlands around their necks. Sashi went towards the Atilla hills and noticed that most of the paandas who had gathered there wore old dhotis and dirty torn vests. Even their uttariyas were old and tattered. These priests had never tried to attract pilgrims by using the glamour of religion or by flattering them and so they were finding it more and more difficult to earn their daily sustenance. Yet, amongst them were great scholars like Gopalji Upadhyay and Seth Bishen Singh Sindhu. These were people who took their duties as a kind of worship, who thought it was sinful to exploit gullible pilgrims and extort as much money from them as possible—a sin as terrible as killing a cow, or misbehaving with one's gurupatni, the guru's wife. Such paandas were not often seen in Attilla nowadays. They were found at Jhulan Bon, Gahbar Bon or the small market places around Mauni Baba's ashram. But today Sashi saw them here at Atilla hills.

They were barefooted. In the days of the Dewan Lalaji, during the time of the East India Company, such paandas wore nageri shoes embroidered in gold thread and jewel studded rings. Perhaps the blood of those glorious bygone days still flowed in their veins and who knew, maybe some day, their blood might boil over in distress! That day was probably not too far off.

Sherafi Sethni did not seem to be there. It was rumoured that the sonless Sethni, who had in fact started all her pieties and worships in order to have a son, had been granted her desire. It was being said that she had spent one month with Kapurthala's sannyasin for this reason. Maybe this was a highly coloured version of the truth but it was a fact that the Kapurthala sannyasin was said to have blessed many childless women with offspring.

Sashi felt dizzy. She went a little further along Ramanreti road. The

dharamshala was crowded with people, saffron robed sadhus belonging to various religious groups of different spiritual sects dedicated to selflessness and non-violence could be seen. Among them were the Laldasi sect, worshippers of Sri Ram, and the Satyanami group who worshipped Parameswar, the Shiv-Narayani sect devoted to Brahma, the Bodiless, and the Garibdasis who worshipped only Sri Krishna. Disciples of all these, and many other such sects were pouring into this otherwise deserted area of Braj. Sashi had spent the major part of her youth here in Braj, and in spite of all her difficulties, her pains, and sorrows, she felt as though a strong but soft silken thread tied her—body and soul—to this place.

She did not think that there was any need for her to go any further. The Sethni was not here. She wondered whether she should go to Rangaji again. In the meantime, the young sun had gown stronger and its tender rays touched everything, lending a bright and beautiful golden tinge to the body of the peahen sitting at Kelikadam with her young ones. She herself had been transformed by her budding love for the young Balbrahmachari. She had become fearless and at the same time she felt a strange curiosity about life… She found a similarly huge crowd near the Singha Duar too.

An educated, bespectacled radheshyami was standing the gate. She came to Sashi and said, “The trial of Mahadev Pandit will be held today.’

“What trial?” asked Sashi. “I have always heard that he is a very devout and good man. What sin could he have committed?”

“No, he has committed no sin. He has been suffering a sort of mental disability for some time. Shastriji’s son has been sitting idle, with no job since he passed out from the Gurukul and Shastriji is trying to take advantage of Mahadev Pandit’s mental disability. Shastriji has the tenacity of a crow and the patience of a stork. He is the one going around exaggerating the mental condition of Mahadev Pandit saying that he is mad. He is saying that he saw the Pandit eating the droppings of a horse, just as the sadhu Lalaji, who gave up all his material things and his title of Zamindar, used to. And he is also saying that he himself heard the Pandit saying to the old pakhwaz player of Lilababa’s Rasmondoli—’You have spent your entire life playing this instrument for the Lord Krishna. But do you earn enough to even eat one satisfactory meal? Go and dash your instrument against Lord Muralidhar’s head, and break it to pieces.’ And going to the old man standing the whole day playing his instrument, Pandit shouted ‘One day all of you will die vomiting blood in one of the narrow lanes of Braj! Haven’t you noticed how your poor legs tremble? What are you all afraid of? Go, go and snatch all the prasad offered to Muralidhar and eat your fill. Don’t you know, you fools, that your Muralidhar has been sucking out your blood for thousands of years, and laughing at men like you?’ The Shastri is going around spreading such rumours about the poor Pandit….”

The elderly, educated radheshyami's eyes filled with tears as she spoke. The two of them walked together towards Gajendramukh Kund. The place for the trial, a large umbrella-like construction, very similar to the typical Asomiya *baat sora* or main gateway, was opposite this sacred Kund. Swamiji Maharaj often sat under this chhatri and declaimed on the sacred books, like the *Ramayana*, the *Puranas*, and on great souls like Ramanuj, Ramananda Swami etc. On the wall of the chhatri was a huge oil painting by Chandrabhanu Rakesh, depicting the people of Ayodha accompanying Bharat when he went to call Sri Ram back. At the centre of this mammoth procession of grief stricken-subjects was Bharat—a Bharat with none of the symbols of royalty, no gorgeous umbrella over his royal head, his body bare of any princely jewellery. His soft bare feet glistened with blisters and other sores, as though he had come after doing hard labour…. Who but Chandrabhanu Rakesh could paint a scene of such divine brotherly love and devotion?

Sashi and the educated woman went inside. Some words written on a wooden slate announced that the bhog had started and that the temple was closed. But the chhatri was packed with people. Mahadev Pandit's trial had started with the Swami of Rangaji sitting on the judge's seat.

"See that woman sitting on the steps of the trial chattri? She is Mahadev Pandit's wife. Can you understand what a terrible thing it is for the father of five children to lose his job?"

Looking at Sashi, she continued, "Why are you so silent?"

Sashi replied, "I do not like the idea of watching the father of five children losing his job."

"The only thing left now is for the judge to give his judgment. Everything else is already over," said the radheshyami.

Sashi felt her blood boil. The person she loved was sitting up there determining the fate of an unfortunate and hapless man! The highly intelligent and dignified Swamiji was clearly visible from where she stood. What judgment would he give, she wondered. What fate would he decree for the poor man? Sashi grew restless.

The trial would have to be over before the temple doors opened, and before Raghunath Swamiji's procession started their ritual circumambulation of the sacred Garuda Stambha. All eyes were fixed eagerly on the Swamiji. But the Swamiji's striking eyes were fixed on the distant horizon, and his sandal-paste adorned forehead was tense with concentration and deep thought.

After a while, Swamiji started speaking in a deep and emotion-filled voice, "This man has served the temple school with great devotion for the last twenty years. Now, in his situation, it is not possible for him to continue this work any more. The devotion and the sense of duty he has displayed towards the temple for all these long years should be an example to all. In recognition of these qualities, the temple authorities will take the responsibility for his treatment.

And not only that, they will also be responsible for looking after his five children. He had the very prestigious work of keeping the area surrounding the sacred Garuda Stambha neat and clean. Now, his wife will be given that work, and for this, the temple authorities will see that she gets the temple prasad regularly twice a day. For the time being, we will not take any decision regarding the employment of a teacher, because there are many unemployed youths who have completed their studies in the tols, the Sanskrit schools, of Mathura and Ayodhya, and who are keen to come to the Rangaji school. We will have to think deeply and at length before we take any decision in this important matter."

A murmur arose from the silent crowd as soon as the Swamiji stopped speaking. The students of the Banmaharaj Institute who were grouped nearby shouted in exultation, "*Jai, Garuda Maharaj Swami, jai!*" And the Brajamaii group who were sitting on the grass nearby also shouted out, "*Jai, Radharani jai*!"

In the meantime, the temple doors had opened, and the shehnai notes indicating the completion of the holy shringar of Rangaji, floated out from the temple. The Garuda Swamiji pushed his way through the respectful crowds and proceeded towards the temple.

Sashi had been standing listening intently beneath a huge monument near the place of the trial. She did not know when the educated radheshyami left her side, so engrossed had she been in the Swamiji's words. Now she thought with pride that this was the man she loved! This was exactly what she wanted him to be like. Her eyes involuntarily filled with tears. And she murmured to herself, "God grant that you will always be like this, that you will always be blessed with the deep human sympathy to understand the sorrow of others, and to be able to see into their very hearts!"

Like water rushing out from a broken dam, the huge crowd of devotees swarmed out behind the horse riders of Rangaji! These horse riders would go around the gardens of the temple complex. It was no longer possible for Sashi to stand there. Even the soldier who guarded the temple had left his post and was running out to see the spectacle.

She walked towards the steps of Garuda Kunda, and stood near the pond for a long time. She wondered at herself—why had she come here? She had no work at this place now. Why was she standing here then? Or had she come to look at the peacock dancing on the steps? But no, such things held no fascination for her any more. But why should she try to find excuses? She knew very well that she was waiting at this spot only because she hoped the Swamiji would pass this way. A feeling of guilt overcame her. But she was helpless…

That night the radheshyamis again reminded her, "These are bad times. Go and find a secure and permanent place to live in. It is no longer safe for you to live here."

She slept very little that night, and when she did sleep, she was plagued by peculiar, unrelated dreams. She saw a terrifying figure moving around in Akrur Ghat near the ancient statue of Hanuman, where the ruins of the chariot of Sri Krishna and Balaram lay strewn. This shadowy figure of ill omen went around Swamiji Digambari's akhara and the Balabhadra akhara of the Madhbavhari sect, and finally came and stood near the ruined Bauddha Bihar of Ramanreti.

She was shocked when she saw the face of this shadowy form! It was the face of Sherafi Sethni whom she had been looking for all through the day! Sherafi Sethni shouted at her in a contemptuous tone: "I lived with the Swamiji for twenty days, and now I am pregnant. But why am I wandering around like this? Why can I find no peace anywhere?"

Then, pointing a finger at Sashi, she screamed, "Go, go away while there is still time! Build a temple in your heart. It is very painful, very painful! No one else can understand."

Then the figure disappeared among the thorny shrubs……

She woke up with a strangled scream. She thought she heard someone banging at her door and she sat up in alarm, and listened for some time. But there was no one.

She remembered that once, a student from Uttar Kashi, had said "Rik has declared that although it is uncivilised, it is not sinful, to go to another man to beget a child. Only untruth is sinful.'

All those rules and customs laid down a thousand years ago by such religious personalities like Manu, Parasar, Brihaspati and others have now become covered with the dust of time. But the Truth has ever remained the same, and neither Rik, nor Manu, nor Parasar or anyone else, has been able to influence or change the Truth. That is why, maybe, she saw the shadowy figure of Sherafi Sethni wandering about among the ruins of the Bauddha Bihar.

No, there was not a sound to be heard in this dead of night. She could not even hear the snoring of the radheshyamis sleeping on the floor of the shack. But she could not sleep any more. She had seen so many curious things in this holy Brajdhaam. Mrinalini too, went around the satras like her these days, looking for something to eat. She took earthenware vessels and stood waiting to collect milk at the Tirumanjan ritual at the Rangaji Temple.

Truly, many changes had taken place in Braj since she had first come. She suddenly heard an announcement in a sonorous voice that put an end to her thoughts. One day, sitting on the steps of the trial place, she had heard the Swamiji of the Rangaji Temple proclaim: Who was that Krishna who indulged in delightful amorous sports in Brajdham? The *Brahmapurana* declared that He was the avatar of the gods. And Basudev himself declared that He was the true Supreme Being, the Parampurush, while the author of Kurukheshtra kabya proclaimed: He is the Maheshwar, the living form of the Supreme.

So many precious and valuable stories and sayings!

Suddenly she sat up in startled apprehension. This time there was really someone knocking on her door. She had been so absorbed in her thoughts that she had been unaware of everything else, she had heard no sound! Now, she looked around and saw the radheshyamis sleeping a little distance away from her. Again someone banged on the door.

She opened the door cautiously and saw two radheshyamis standing there, with their uttariyas covering their heads and bodies. As soon as she opened the door, they walked inside.

One of them said, “We have some bad news for you. Alamgarhi is dead.”

“Alamgarhi is dead? How? What happened?” Sashi cried out.

“He had cholera,” they replied. “He would not let us tell you. The poor man thought that he would get better. Come, come with us.”

Quite a crowd had gathered near the Ghat. Alamgarhi had lived in Braj for a long time, and he had many friends and acquaintances. Everyone looked up as Sashi entered, as though they had been waiting for her. An old woman was sitting, weeping, at the feet of Alamgarhi. Probably she was the spiritual sister of the priest.

A radheshyami was busy readying the dead body for cremation. The priest had spent his days wearing a faded old dhoti. Today he would wear new things, a new string of holy beads, and sandal paste and the sacred sand of Radhabarg would adorn his forehead.

Suddenly the weeping woman looked up at Sashi, and her face turned livid with anger. She screamed out, addressing everyone in general, “Sisters, you are all living in Braj. Alamgarhi kept a young woman to help him in his household needs. But, tell me, does that mean that she is the heir to his properties?”

The radheshyami preparing the dead body spoke up, “I have lived for more than thirty years at Braj, and I cannot keep silent, or turn a blind eye, when I see an injustice being done. Just before he died, Alamgarhi said that the bundle of old coins should be given to this young woman. I am only telling you all what I heard him say.”

Hearing this, the temple sister of Alamgarhi burst out crying loudly. She would stop crying every now and again to scream out vulgar and abusive words, “I suspected that I would fall into some such trap. He was a eunuch. How could he make her his heir?”

In the meantime, the radheshyamis who had gathered formed two rival groups, and ultimately, they almost came to blows. The things, like sandal paste, the sacred sand and the jasmine garlands brought to adorn Alamgarhi’s corpse scattered on the floor. While all this shouting and abusing was going on, one of the women went out and brought in the priest of Kesighat, who was preparing the flower bedecked cot for the Alamgarhi’s last journey. And seeing

this stout priest the squabbling women became quiet, and arranged their dishevelled clothes. The priest from Kesighat looked around. He took in the radheshyamis, the old broken down walls of the shack, the scattered jasmine garlands, and kept still for a while. Then he gazed at the dead body of Alamgarhi, and after a moment's silence, he said, "My sisters, it is high time for you to see yourselves, now that you have cut down the tree and started to water the dead branches. Go, go, take a mirror, and look at yourselves! Look and listen carefully, and each one of you will hear the laughter. Each one of you will hear the One sitting on the lotus, laughing at you in scorn. Look, my sisters, look! Do not these ornaments, these new clothes, sandal paste and jasmine garlands, look ridiculous on Alamgarhi's body? And you are all fighting over a small bundle of coins! Come, give me the bundle. If the Panchayat has to sit, not one of you will see even one small coin."

Alamgarhi's temple sister once again burst out crying. "Listen to my story," she said. "For a long time I used to eat the potatoes kept aside to feed the horses, and in this way, I was able to collect quite a good sum of money for my last rites and my funeral. But the other day, someone came stole the money. My shed collapsed over my head. Finding out that I had no money for my last rites, the Sethni one day set the dogs on me. The poor Alamgarhi used to say to me, 'You are much older than me, so you will die before me. I will see to it that your dead body is carried on a cot decked with jasmine flowers.'" The old woman started beating her head against the cot Alamgarhi was lying on, and weeping her heart out.

Sashi had stood a little distance away, listening to everything. She now went forward. There were no tears in her eyes, but her hair had become undone and tumbled down her shoulders. She said, "I do not want Alamgarhi's money. I have only come to take a last look at him."

Without wasting a moment she went out, and started walking aimlessly along the sands of the Jamuna river. It was unbelievable how everything could be over in one single day! It was only now that she realised that Alamgarhi had been a source of strength to her, albeit subconsciously.

She had no idea how long she sat there. A little while back, she thought, the large bird with a yellow neck was playing about near her. Now that place was empty, but for a shadow. A couple of radheshyamis had come by, and had left after advising her to find consolation and release through weeping. One of them had tried to snatch the beads around her throat…

She sensed someone coming towards her, and looking up. She saw Dr Roychoudhury approaching. He had probably gone to see patients on the parikrama route.

"You are still sitting here?" he asked, in surprise. "I saw you sitting here four hours ago when I passed this way. Come on, get up. I know you are a brave girl. At least, I am confident that you will not be willing to lose a gem for the

sake of a mere tortoise. Come."

Looking up at Dr Roychoudhuri with defeated eyes, she cried out, and tried to clasp his knees.

"You are the only one who can show me the right path," she cried. "Please believe me when I say that I am starting to feel scared. I want to live a healthy and clean life. I give you my word…" Her voice became choked with emotion. And, putting her head between her knees, she started weeping in desperation.

In the meantime, the last rites for Alamgarhi had started on the banks of the Jamuna, and water from this sacred river was being sprinkled on his dead body. The priest from Kesighat was uttering the prayers for the dead over the corpse.

Sashi did not have to do anything. She did not even have to collect the ash, and the bits of bones, the asthi, from the burnt body. Alamgarhi's temple sister did all that. The radheshyamis had left long back, after taking a dip in the river, and Sashi was sitting there all alone.

The Kesighat priest approached her, and said, "Go home. And listen. It is not only shameful, but also sad, that a girl like you should wander around the temples seeking a piece of bread, or that you should spend your days living in a shack with the old radheshyamis. Look up and be brave. You have a long life ahead of you. Dr Roychoudhuri desires that you train to be a nurse."

She cried out, "A nurse! A nurse!!"

Before she could reply, the entire area resounded with jubilant cries of "*Jai, Radharani jai*!" The priest walked up to the burnt body of Almghari, and before he left, he once again said to her, "Today, you have come face to face with reality. This is the best time for you to make a decision…"

Alamgarhi's ashes flowed into the river, and collected near a small whirlpool. Then following the laws of nature, the ashes followed the course of the river, and disappeared… Thus, in one moment, the life of the robust Alamgarhi was reduced to nothing, and just one gust of wind was enough to completely absorb the mortal remains of the man into the vast deeps of the great river. Even his mortal remains disappeared into the vast and cruel sands of the Jamuna river.

Sashi bathed in the river, and walked towards the Dheer Samir Ghat in her wet clothes. An old woman met her on the way, and said, "I don't think the radheshyamis want you to stay with them any longer. The news of Alamgarhi's death has already spread and those wrestlers who are always busy building their bodies have started taking drugs early today. I saw them building a paandal at Gopinath Bazar. I think it is already time for the musical soirée that is being held there today. The times are not good. There is a group of goondas from Mathura who are wandering around all over the place."

The old woman was right. As soon as Sashi arrived at the radheshyamis'

hovel, they yelled at her, “Why have you come back here again to trouble us? We cannot take the responsibility of a young woman like you. We have the money for our last rites tied to our waists, and we cannot risk losing that. Go to the Manab Sevashram (a charitable place for destitutes) at Athkhambar, or else go to Dr Roychoudhuri’s clinic and sleep on the verandah there. The goondas are full of bhang and have already knocked on our door three times. Go away! They have an eye on our savings too.”

The old women could be heard chewing dry chapattis. It was curious. These half starved women collected money for their last rites, and guarded it ferociously. They had the money, but they would starve rather spend even one coin of that money!

Sashi went away, and walking along Gopinath Bazar with her thick, long, dripping hair spread over her wet clothes, she looked more like an ugly ghost than a young woman.

Had any one else ever faced such a situation, she wondered? Was there any other woman who, after having consigned her dead companion to the flames, had to roam the streets looking for a place to stay?

She stopped, and thought she saw some steps. But on closer scrutiny she saw that it was one of those concrete tanks for storing water for horses. She would have liked to rest there for a while but she realised that she could not afford to waste time. She had started shivering in her wet clothes as the breeze from the river became cooler. She was also deathly tired, and felt as though she might topple over any moment. With great determination born of necessity, she walked on until she came to the marble steps of the bhajan ashram, and she managed to go in.

But there was no one there. Probably the bad weather had discouraged them, and everyone had found a place in some hovel or other.

She wondered what should she do There was no use going to Harabari—there were no abandoned rooms there. Besides, all the radheshyamis there knew about Alamgarhi’s death. There were very few people in the market. Even the shops and small stalls had pulled their shutters down. Probably they had all gone to the music function. Normally the bazaars of Vrindaban were never so deserted, not even late at night. She could have slept in the stalls selling old tree barks used in the olden days for paper, strings of holy beads and other such things, to pilgrims. But when the music performances ended at midnight, people would come through from here with torches in their hands and it would not be safe for a lone young woman like her.

She noticed a flickering lamp suddenly light up at the entrance to the lane leading to Gyangodari. There was a man coming her way with his possessions tied up in many bundles. He was drunk, he could hardly walk straight. He had his bedding under his arm, and a liquor bottle in his hand. Someone had told her to beware of men who drank alone, without companions…

But he was coming this way, and he could not fail to see the wide verandah where she was sitting. As she got up to leave, he came with his bedding and bottle, and sat down on one of the steps of the verandah.

"Hello! Who are you, standing inside my shop? Don't you know that this is my place? Oh! You look like the old mother radheshyami. Why are you standing? Sit down, and be comfortable. I am your old son. If you want to lie down there, it's all right. I will sleep near the water tank there. You need not worry, I am a member of the security forces, a spy!"

The man opened his bundle, and a stench of dried up old vomit filled the air. Sashi tried to identify him but it was too dark, and his face was covered with an unkempt beard and moustache. She did not remember having seen him before. He took another swig from his bottle and then pointing the bottle towards the sky, he shouted, "Old mother, it is only at night that I can go out in Braj. Do you know why? Because—listen, I will whisper it to you—because I am a spy, I am the king of spies! Do you understand, the king of spies! This time, I am after the Baba of Phultal. Have you seen Phultali Baba's parade? During the Holi festival he took out a procession in Vrindaban and Mathura. And would you believe it, twenty litres were carried by four men each and eight donkeys carried the colour, the aabir! There was aabir everywhere! Under the feet of the the people of Braj, on the walls, on the idols in the temples, on the clothes of the strong Horenga bai. Everything was covered with the colours of Holi! There was so much aabir, that it seemed that even the sands of the Jamuna would be drowned in it! And, as if that was not enough, he catered food for no less than ten thousand people! There was a vast gathering of wealthy Seths. The rumble of their numerous ornate carriages, the jingling of their countless money bags! And there I was, the unfortunate associate of a spy! Seths! Money! The mysterious and amazing deep cave of the money makers! And I, the ill-fated scout. I am today banned from entering the Lion Gate! The armed guard said that this time everyone in Braj would be given a blanket during the Rath Yatra. That fellow, the guard, was once a soldier!"

The man laughed out loud.

"Sleep in peace," he said. "I will sleep near the water tank."

Then the drunken man said in a whispering voice, "Have you read Premchand's story, 'Constable of Salt'? The armed guard always keeps his gun pointed at the stomach of the rotten Seth, an he scolds our security men, calling them namakharam, ungrateful ones! Tell me, have you really read that story by Premchand?"

He got even more intoxicated as he finished his bottle, and then like a sick man, he toppled over near the water tank and started vomiting.

Taking advantage of this, she started running away. She had thought that the small tea shop at Harabari was empty but she saw that there were a few men sitting there under cover of the darkness.

Beharimohan Kunja's shop was open. She streaked past it like a tigress looking for her lost cub. She ran past the neem tree and the concrete well, and arriving at Mrinalini's hut, she started banging on the door. She heard a rather rough voice shouting from inside, "Don't bang too hard, it's an old door."

She collapsed at the door step. The breeze was getting colder. Her clothes were still damp, and each gust slapped at her mercilessly. She simply could not go any further! She would die!

The door opened, and Mrinalini came out.

"You! At this time of the night? I told you before that it will not be convenient for you to stay here. There are already two women up there cooped up in two pigeon holes! I rented them at two rupees each. But they have not paid anything the last two months… Why, you are shivering like a sick woman!" said Mrinalini.

"I am still in my wet clothes after cremating Alamgarhi. I have not yet been able to change. Please, let me stay here tonight", cried Sashi.

"You look as though you will topple over any moment. Come, come inside," replied Mrinalini. "Alamgarhi's death has become public news by now. I also knew that the radheshyamis would not let you live with them. People are getting more selfish and cruel day by day. Some of my clothes are lying at the corner of the bed, go and change into them. Be as quiet as you can, my mother is very unwell. I have to tie her up when I go looking for food. That is the state we have come to. I used to pay a few paise and ask a radheshyami to look after her while I was away. But now their demands have increased. They can earn much more in a shorter time if they sit with begging bowls near the Banke Behari lane or in front of the Tortoise Temple…. I could have let you stay in the nearest hovel. But three ghostly looking women have taken possession, promising to pay a rent of two rupees. But we have not seen a single coin for the last three years. And meanwhile we are waiting for the Trust money, and the three of us are starving."

In the dim light inside the hut, Sashi went and crouched near Mrinalini's feet.

Mrinalini continued, "I do not know whether Alamgarhi helped you or troubled you but I do know that he always looked after you and gave you protection, albeit indirectly. Now that he is no more, those dogs who go smelling out young widows and bad women will have a field day with you. They know very well that there is no one to protect you now. And listen, those Babajis who have nothing and no one to support them will be after you to go and live with them as helpers. Be careful! Don't make a second mistake. Even if you starve, it is better to die a good and virtuous woman by the roadside than that."

Sashi did not reply. When the two of them lay down to sleep on the floor, the sounds of merrymaking and singing floated in from the music performances

going on at Gopinath Bazar. Even in the midst of this noise, Sashi could hear a beautiful voice singing a song with poignant feeling and emotion. It was a song that had been heard everywhere in Braj in the recent past—"While you are alive, live as though the whole world belongs to you."

Mrinalini said, "The words of the song are truly beautiful. The roving minstrels have been singing this song to the people of Braj for quite some time now. So much so, that the other day, even my mother sat in the bazar singing the same song. Do you know, nowadays people have started recognising my mother in the markets? Why are you crying?"

Mrinalini continued, "You are a brave and strong girl, and I think you are good and virtuous, too. Besides, people say that Dr Roychoudhuri is ready to help you. He had great hopes of his daughter working side by side with him. But I am sure you have heard how his daughter has dashed all his hopes and disappointed him. His wife too has become bedridden. It seems she imagines that she sees that Christian youth in every corner. Come, get up, and wipe your tears. What are you worried about? Love? Are you attracted to Rangaji's Balbrahmachari Swamiji? Days, months and years will go by, and if your attraction is not merely a momentary infatuation, then it will pass the test just as the purity of gold is tested by the testing stone. Then your love will shine forth as bright and permanent as pure gold. Nothing, not even the Swamiji's absentmindedness, will be able to hurt or hinder that pure love! Believe me. I am telling you all this from the experience of my forty odd years. Now, wipe your tears. I tell you, the years will fly past so fast that you will not even realize it. You will come back. I am quite sure that you are too intelligent to lose a pearl chasing for a tortoise!"

In due time, the flickering lamp went out. In the deep darkness, these two wounded, hurt souls lay on the floor, arms entwined around each other. But at this moment, crushed with the fears of an unknown and fearsome future, they looked more like two innocent children.

Fourteen

The blind Thakur Sahib now spent the better part of his days ruminating on the memories of his past days, and when he woke up from these ruminations, he sometimes thought that his soul had already taken leave from his ruined body. That he, who was just moments ago capable of movement, was but an ugly corpse. When he met the older citizens of Braj, he wanted to ask them just one question: did they also have similar thoughts, similar ideas? But no, he had not got any satisfactory answer so far. Sometimes he thought that, if by some divine intervention, he got his sight back, he would go to every old man in Braj, and ask them the same question, 'On what calculation, what faith, did these men—greedy for life—believe that their souls were still intact in their broken old bodies, that their souls had not long ago become separated from the shell of their mortal bodies?'

One day Thakur Sahib sat for a longer time on the temple steps, and gradually all his cronies who had gathered there to exchange gossip, departed. A group of people belonging to the Rammondoli passed by in front of him, singing their bhajans. The fragrance of the particular attar which they had applied on their bodies aroused fresh memories in the Thakur Sahib's mind as he visualized luscious female calfs drenched in sweat. But, how terrible! Here he was, sitting on the steps of a temple, thinking of the attractive legs of an immoral woman! And he was reminded of her by the sacred singing and dancing of the Ram devotees of all things! He was stricken by shameful guilt. But at the same time, he felt like laughing.

There was a time when the Thakur Sahib used to leave everything, his food, his wife and children for the sake of liquor. He remembered how once his elder sons had come and scolded him, calling him 'you selfish, wicked, ungrateful man!' His children went about wearing torn old clothes, and his wife had sold her jewellry, piece by piece…. What days those were! All his wealth, spent on a lot of immoral women…. His lips went dry at the thought. Why did those singers of the Ram mondoli with that same fragrant attar, have to pass by him, reminding of those appalling days!

But the memories of the terrible days following the bifurcation of the country were awakened in the Thakur Sahib's mind only by some particular sounds, like that of tongas being dragged along the rough roads of Braj by strong horses, for instance. Whenever he heard that sound, his head would automatically droop down between his knees…

Thakur Sahib used to work in a cement company after the country was divided. He had the astonishing feeling that the tiny cement particles formed into a white sheet and followed him. His head drooped down again. But he was not the only displaced person. So many kings and maharajas, so many warriors

and brave men of high rank, had lost their hearths and homes, and had been forced to earn their livelihood. Everyone knew that.

Damodar, the heir apparent to the throne of Jhansi, the adopted son of the heroic Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, where did he disappear to? The boy who, when very young, tore up the piece of paper with 'Ram naam' written on it, made it into small balls, rolled them in flour and fed it to the fish in the royal ponds? He too became a nonentity! And Damodar's son, Lakshman Rao, was still to be seen in Indore's Imli Bazar, going about barefoot wearing a worn out, torn vest. Thakur felt like laughing. But he immediately felt that the sagging and crumpled skin beneath his eyes had become moist with tears.

The minute cement particles collected to form a white sheet that always followed him around. He wondered whether Damodar, too, felt like this.

His head drooped down again, and he clutched his walking stick firmly in his old hands. He did not know how long he sat there in this semi-conscious state. Suddenly, he was startled into wakefulness by a loud shout. An excited group of people was approaching him. Someone shouted in his ears, "Your wife cannot be found, she has vanished from the house."

Thakur tightened his hold on his stick. His drooping head became straight, and he cried out, "What happened?"

A few old radheshyamis screamed out, "Instead of sitting here for hours in false vanity, it would have been better if you had sat inside the room. You may have lost your eyesight, but you still have the use of you limbs, don't you? You could have sat with your wife. Now the poor girl, your daughter, is rushing around frantically, looking for her mother."

Someone from the crowd said, "It will do no good standing talking to this blind old man. I only hope the old woman has not gone towards Maunibaba's camp. Some wicked fellow fed the pious man's elephant laddus filled with intoxicants, and it has gone berserk. Last night, it was only by sheer good luck that the Mahanta could pacify the animal."

Banging the sticks they carried on the hard road, the group went forward creating a tremendous din.

Thakur felt his throat going dry, and his tired old head drooped down again. He realised that Mrinalini had kept aside the meagre amount that was left over from the sale of the temple after paying off the greedy priests, for the expenses of their last rites. Now they had to do with the twenty rupees from the Trust, and the raw bread from the satra. His wife, he realised, had gone out looking for food driven by hunger.

After a little while, Thakur Sahib again heard the sounds of the men returning. He felt himself trembling and he held on to his walking stick as strongly as he could.

Mrinalini's voice could be heard. She was screaming like a tigress who had

lost her cubs. “You see this blind old man? He is responsible for ruining our prosperous and happy lives. He left us to starve while he squandered all the money on liquor. And now, see, how liquor has taken its revenge and kicked him down into this life!”

Then Mrinalini did an unthinkable thing! She tore off the blouse she was wearing, and exposing her breasts to the assembled radheshyamis, she screamed, “Tell me, all of you tell me! Could I not have become a mother? Could I not have given birth to a ‘divine’ child? Why did I have to spend my whole life taking care of these two old scarecrows, being the ‘keepers’ of these two ghostlike old creatures? Tell me, has anyone else ever had to face such a situation? You are poor radheshyamis living in ramshackle hovels. But have even you women ever come to this state?”

One of the old women came and whispered in Mrinalini’s ear, “Arrange your clothes and cover yourself properly. You have done a lot of pious deeds for so long, looking after your old parents. They will not live much longer. Have patience and take care of their last rites also.”

Another one said, “Why should you save money for the old man’s last rites? We hear that you have suffered more than your share. Now, it is high time for you to look to yourself, and enjoy what is left.”

The bells of Muraldhar temple rang out. And almost at the same time, excited voices could be heard approaching. A stout paanda was almost dragging Mrinalini’s mother. He said, “It seems the old woman had no water to drink. She had gone to the stable of the soldiers’ horses in search of water.”

The paanda laughed, and the old radheshyamis joined in. Mrinalini took her mother’s hand and led her towards the dark steps of the temple. Thakur Sahib’s family had long since forgotten the difference between light and dark, and Mrinalini could clearly see the steps shrouded in darkness. It seemed as though she had been leading her mother up these dark steps since time immemorial.

Gradually, the footfalls died away, and the loud voices of the radheshyamis too faded away. Braj became as quiet and still as a graveyard. But Thakur Sahib continued to sit where he was. A few gusts of breeze came and touched his frail body. He was wearing an old vest, and he shivered with cold. No one had thought of taking him upstairs today, and he could not climb the steps without help. It was very late. But he was helpless. He clutched his stick and sat there alone. He wondered whether he should lie down where he was—like those two homeless children who slept on the roadside. He felt the steps with his hands. The steps seemed to be very narrow. It would be difficult for him to sit comfortably on them. The wind was getting colder as it got later and later in the night.

He must have dozed off as he sat there. Suddenly he woke up with a start. Someone was standing near him. He called out, “Who is it?”

He heard a voice saying, “Come, I will help you to your room. I have passed

this way three times, and every time I have found you sitting in exactly the same position."

"But my boy, who are you, who have come to me on this dark night like a veritable messenger from God?" asked Thakur Sahib.

The boy did not reply, and Thakur Sahib mused, "Your mind is as bright and pure as the light of a lamp yet you work in the dead of night!"

He stood up, his knees creaking with the effort. He stretched out his hand to hold the boy's shoulder, but instead his hand fell on his soft young cheek. Thakur Sahib was startled. "You are crying," he said. I can feel your tears on my hand. Why do you cry, my son?"

"No it is nothing," replied he boy. "It is just that you are blind and old, and you are sitting in the dark all alone."

Thakur Sahib was deeply touched. He touched the boy's face and shoulders with trembling hands. Then he said, "Listen, my compassionate little friend. Do you see the situation I have fallen into now? I sometimes have the feeling that I have become a tiny infant, sitting on the temple priest's lap, and playing. This body of mine is now but a ruined old house. These thoughts often come to my mind, they are very painful."

The boy simply said, "Come, let us go inside, it is getting very late."

Very carefully, the two of them climbed up the dark steps, and when they came to the small step, Thakur Sahib said, "My little friend, I pray that you will always have the capacity to feel for those in sorrow. That you will always be able to weep for them. I am sure the wishes of an old man like me will not go in vain… If one walks along the right path from the beginning, the true values will not unexpectedly burst upon you like thunder storms when you are old. The Lord Braj Chandra will Himself reveal the Truth. He, who has kept two thousand odd radheshyamis in thrall for so long, He will… Go forward slowly, and take me down very carefully. The steps are tricky. That is why the radheshyamis hesitate to help me down these steps. They have become slippery with age and moss. My old ancestor of Behari Kunj could not have imagined that one day, one of his descendents would become poor and that these broken old steps would become necessary for him."

They passed the steps safely, and stepping on to the last step, Thakur Sahib put his hands on the boy's head, and spoke almost in a whisper, "I have one great desire. And I feel that, since you arrived suddenly like a messenger from God Himself to help me on this dark night, you will be able to fulfill my desire. Will you do it?"

"If it is within my reach, I certainly will," replied the boy.

"I am sure you know that Rangaji's Rath Yatra will be held in a few days. I have a strong desire to see that. If you can spare a little time, you can take me to see the Rath Yatra. Tell me, can you do this for me?"

“Of course I can,” replied the boy unhesitatingly.

Even in the darkness, the youth saw a smile flash across the old man’s lips. The young boy would never have imagined that a smile could be so sad. Thakur Sahib was blind so what would he ‘see’ or enjoy in the Rath Yatra the boy thought sadly except the din and tumult of the crowds? But this soft-hearted and compassionate youth did not put any such question to the sad old man.

“Now go,” said Thakur Sahib. “I can manage from here. You will remember what I said, won’t you?”

Leaning on his walking stick, Thakur Sahib slowly entered the dark hovel. Like a living ghost who had come out of his coffin and was now going back again.

Fifteen

The whitish snake slithered out from Saudamini's room early in the morning. Then, without even a glance at the people there, it went to the well and quietly slithered back again. The two Babajis of the ashram, who begged for their living, said, "This is not a good omen. Today will not be a good day."

They were probably right. A man lay dead in front of the door to the clinic. It had rained heavily the night before, and the man had possibly come seeking medical attention.

A couple radheshyamis from the akhara came and looked closely at the corpse. Suddenly one of them shouted, "The man has a gold tooth."

Hearing this, all the radheshyamis got excited and they exclaimed together: "A gold tooth!"

They closed in on the dead body and started to examine it. One of the Babajis said, "In Haridwar, when I was very young, I used to collect dead people's asthis from the river using a special strainer. Sometimes I used to find coins and gold teeth. Will you believe me when I tell you that I collected twenty gold teeth in one year! Nowadays, I do not think the boys collecting asthis from a river get even one gold tooth in a year."

The gold tooth in the dead man's mouth caused quite a stir among the people of Braj and soon a crowd gathered in front of the dispensary. Saudamini heard two old women who had come to draw water talking about it: "How can you say that there is no divine power in Braj? Some sweeper would have come and kicked the body into the river and that would have been the end of the man. But now he will be carried in style by gentlemen, and thus go on his journey to heaven!"

Another one said, "I heard the soldiers of the camp say the other day that the government had decided to take care of the homeless and destitute people of Braj who do not have any money for their last rites."

A radheshyami with a big tumour in her neck, screamed out, "Don't believe all that, they are simply the hollow words of an empty vessel! The soldiers had said the same thing last year and the year before too."

Another one said, "It will soon be the turn of the doctor's wife. I saw her the other day. She is as thin as a stick."

"These are the problems of the widowed daughter and the Christian youth whom she loves."

"The woman must have poisoned someone's food some time," a woman shouted. "Otherwise how could she have given birth to such a daughter? A

young woman who roams about alone all over the place! The immoral fool!"

Then, without bothering about the crowd of people in front of the clinic, the three women stripped off all their clothes and started to bathe nonchalantly beside the well. These women had long since crossed the barriers between men and women—both physically and mentally—and now they found no difference between the sexes. Saudamini had heard this from many in Braj. Maleness and femaleness had become so much a matter of routine that it no longer had any effect on them.

Exactly at the time that this unknown man's dead body was being carried in a procession to be cremated on the banks of the Jamuna, another procession celebrating Haridas Swami's acquisition of Banke Behari had also started, and by chance the two met and joined together. The people were astonished and cried out, "What great good fortune! What a wondrous fate! See how the two processions have become one!"

Saudamini went inside. She examined the corners of her room trying to see where the snake had disappeared to so mysteriously in broad daylight. The old wood of the wall had numerous holes but it didn't seem as though it had entered one of them because there were many lizards running around near the holes. As soon as she opened the window a few house sparrows flew inside and started picking in the mud.

She could hear the bells of the Mahanta's elephant. Haridas Swami's procession must be nearing Rangaji's chariot house. The words of the two Babajis rang in her ears. They'd said that the snake suddenly appearing like that in the morning was not a god omen.

The dispensary was unusually deserted and quiet this afternoon. Most of the people had not returned after cremating the unknown man. Saudamini reflected that death seemed to come faster here than in other places. A number of well known faces had already vanished. It seemed that life and death were close allies here in the holy city of Braj. She was gradually coming to realise that the light of her beloved mother's life was also getting dimmer by the day. She wondered whether she would be able to continue as she was until the time arrived. A voice seemed to whisper in her ear every morning, "There is not much time, not much time!" Many distressing thoughts had assailed her mind since this morning. She could have gone with the radheshyamis to the burning ghat. Now she had nothing to do but brood. Of course she could go and help the woman who looked after Anupama. But she found it impossible to sit near her mother for any length of time.

She walked towards Dheer Samir Ghat. Standing on the steps of the ghat, she looked around. Dr Roychoudhury and the others had not come here for the cremation. Suddenly she noticed the man who caught snakes sitting under the wild fig tree in the distance. She remembered again that the Babaji had foretold that morning that the appearance of the serpent boded no good. She had lived

in her room together with it for many years, and had come to feel a sort of kinship with it. She still remembered the first time she had heard the slithering sound— like a thick rope being dragged along—and she had realised that the snake had started its regular nocturnal journey. Some strange force had seemed to halt her cry of fear before it came out from her throat!

She went towards the snake catcher, urged on by some kind of magic.

The man was busy skinning the snake and the reptile's body sagged down like the pale white body of a fish. Saudamini felt as though someone was flogging her with a whip! Looking up at the man's face she cried out, "Where did you kill this snake?"

He glanced at her, but made no reply.

"I can recognise the snake," she said. "It is the old snake from Dasarath Akhra."

This time, the man nodded. Suddenly he became animated. "Look," he said, "You usually do not see such bright and clear snake skins in Braj. Silver spots on a gold background!"

The clear, almost transparent, rays of the young sun fell on the sands of Jamuna. She walked slowly towards the tents and umbrellas, and once again she found herself alone on the rough, cool sands of the river. A lovely, melodious voice floated out from the old, discoloured tent: "*Oh, you sweet tongued messenger Uddhab, you told us to shut our eyes,… those eyes in which the image of our Lord Sri Hari is ever imprinted. You told us to stop our ears and to embrace matted locks. But your advice, to sacrifice sandal paste and cover our limbs with ash. Do you not know that we have always lived with the poison of sorrow and desire? Those ever searching Yogis are very akin to us. We are never separated from them even for an instant. We are as close and inseparable as trees and their shadows…"*

The song touched her deeply. And without her being aware of it, her eyes filled with tears. It seemed as though someone was whispering to her again, "There is very little time!"

Her husband Subroto's face had now become a dim and hazy memory. And another face had become bright and luminous, like a new sun. A face that absorbed her entire being and all her thoughts. The people of Braj had already started speculating that one day this person would surely arrive at her doorstep…

She came to this same place in the afternoon and a radheshyami came and kept her company for a short while. She shared the prasad from Muralidhar Temple, which she had brought wrapped in a leaf, with Saudamini. But she left after some time and Saudamini found herself alone again

She noticed some people approaching her from Bhut Gali. Not knowing what else to do, she stood up. She could hear their soft voices advising her, "Run,

Run! They are pursuing the radheshyamis and pouncing on them. They are treating the old women like young women, and dragging them out. Those wicked fellows have started abusing these poor old radheshyamis because they cannot find any young ones."

"These depraved fellows! These monsters, may their mouths be infested with horrible pests!"

Saudamini covered her face with one end of her sari, and walked away from where she was. A little further away, she saw a radheshyami lying near the Bhut Gali. Approaching her, she saw that the woman was completely naked! She saw that one hand of the old woman was covering her breasts, and the other hand was trying to feel something on the lower part of her body. There was no time to waste! The monsters might come this way at any moment. She started running in the dark….

She heard someone from the other side of the wall, "Those fellows have been busy boiling and grinding tobacco since morning. They are all intoxicated, and are now after the widows who live with the priests under the guise of helping them in worship and puja."

"Do you not remember last night's *neraneri* festival? In spite of tying up the faces of the cooperating widows, the corrupt Pandits went around and identified them by their feet."

"How long will such horrible deeds continue to be committed in the name of religion?"

She must hurry! These greedy wolves might come and pounce on her at any moment. She ran faster. She ran and ran, through the dark night, driven by some unknown strength.

Sixteen

Sri Rangaji's annual Rath Yatra festival came around. Water dripped from the branches of the beautiful kelikadam tree, and the jasmine trees in Rangaji's garden blossomed with fresh vigour. The doors of the chariot house had been opened some days back, and the carpenters and other workers had been busy. The chariot was ready. Chaos and excitement reigned everywhere, and all connected persons and officials were at their wits' end trying to have everything perfect in time. Agents of the priests were everywhere, and a few clever paandas from the Mathura junction too, went around the temple precincts, trying to catch pilgrims.

Stalls sprang up around the temple. The crowds were so thick that it was almost impossible to walk on Gopinath Bazar road, and the groups of peacocks that strutted about near the trial shed fled, and sought refuge beneath the Arjun trees of Radhabag. The chariot was built from eighty maunds of sandalwood, and it had a proportionately large chakra. One would think that this was Kuber's Chaitra Rath. Would the streets of Braj be able to bear its weight? This was the famous Maharath of Rangaji! There had been a constant stream of people since early morning and the whole area around Rangaji was packed with devotees who had arrived from Nandigram, Barsana, Uttar Kashi, and even from places as distant as Ayodhya. Everyone was eager for a chance to pull the ropes of the great chariot, and all were greatly excited at the prospect, remote though it might be for most of them.

The sky reverberated with enthusiastic cries of "*Jai, Lord Rangaji, Jai*!"

After careful calculations of day and time Rangaji's great Rath was brought out from the chariot house precisely at the auspicious moment and the ritual of Narbali was started. This was the ritual of spreading boiled rice by the kilo, in the shape of semi circles under the chariot wheels. The bells of Braj rang as the chariot rolled out, making a sound like the billows of the sacred Yamuna river. The figures of the celestial beings, the shiris and the gandharbas, that adorned the chariot seemed to have become alive, as though human blood was flowing through them! Yet, until just the other day, these wooden figures had looked like neglected, careworn and sick old women! Now they were decked with jasmine garlands, nose rings and earrings, and clothes of the finest silk.

Indeed it was rightly said, "Nowhere in Braj will you find possessions and pleasure as in Rangaji. Gopeswar is always damp with the waters of the Yamuna, and Behariji is in sleep from ten in the morning till twelve in the afternoon. And He rests from six in the evening to nine at night. And there was no wealthier king than Gobindji."

The massive chariot carrying Rangaji Maharaj went forward majestically to the accompaniment of gun salutes and triumphant shouts. The pilgrims and

devotees scrambled for a chance to pull the thick ropes of the chariot. The police forces of the chungi formed long lines in order to protect the huge throng of excited people from the great chariot wheels.

The magnificent chariot wound its way forward, stopping at intervals to allow the people some respite. But it seemed that the crowds did not need any respite or rest today. There were thousands upon thousands of people gathered there today, and all of them seemed to be endowed with some extraordinary strength and stamina. Even the weak old radheshyamis seemed to possess great strength as they pulled the ropes of the divine chariot. Indeed, there was no need for the police today. A few radheshyamis playfully threw jasmine garlands and water at them!

The crowds had started collecting at Rangaji a week earlier. Similar crowds gathered when Rangaji went on the garuda shaped golden carriage, and also when He travelled on the silver shesh nag carriage, or when He sat on the sculptured throne and circumambulated Braj. But, from where did the half starved radheshyamis get their unusual strength today? Its source could only be their unquestioning faith. Yes, Faith was their strength!

The usually teeming Gopinath Bazar looked like a graveyard today. Even the stalls that sold tulsi bead garlands near the steps of Behari Kunj had downed their shutters. Every business house, big or small, was closed and their owners had gone to see the Rath Yatra.

Thakur Sahib sat alone on the steps for a long time. A couple of radheshyamis had helped him down. They could not refuse the old man's request on this auspicious day after all. The blind Thakur had managed to bring out his old Jodhpuri coat from the trunk. He remembered that at one time this Jodhpuri had been his favourite piece of clothing. And today, on his holiest of holy days, the radheshyamis had not hesitated to help him to wear it.

"It has become very loose," one of them said. And Thakur Sahib replied that that was but natural, for his chest had measured no less than forty inches when the coat had been made. Thakur Sahib laughed out loud. It had been ages since he'd laughed freely like this.

"Sahib, you are all ready to go to the Rath Yatra, but who will take you?" asked one of the radheshyamis. "Everyone has gone to try to get a chance to pull the ropes of the great chariot. Who will hold you?"

Thakur Sahib did not reply. Instead, glancing at his old Jodhpuri coat, he recited a Sanskrit couplet: *"The face has become lined with age, the hair has turned gray. The limbs have become stiff and rigid; but the craving remains young."*

The radheshyamis gazed at him, fascinated, and he was encouraged. He started singing in a low tone: *"When a famous and respected person falls prey to poverty, and goes around with a begging bowl, then there is a struggle between his words and his life, who will go first."*

A radheshyami cried out in sympathy, “Oh! If only you had your eyesight, how you would have enjoyed the Rath Yatra today!”

Thakur Sahib replied, “Oh, no. I do not need the benefit of sight. I still have my sense of hearing. I can hear the rumble of the wheels of the holy chariot; and the sweet sounds of its bells, And I can also hear the waves of laughter of Muralidhar Himself.” Then, pointing his fingers towards the radheshyamis, he said, “I can hear the footsteps of the Lord of Mathura. Believe me, I can clearly hear the sounds of the footsteps of the Lord of Mathura!” …. And Thakur Sahib went almost mad with joy!

The radheshyamis were getting restless. The Rath had already approached the chungi.

“If you want, and if you are sure you will not be crushed by the crowd, we can take you to the kadam tree there. But we cannot stay and look after you. We can hear the sounds of the chariot approaching, and the shehnai music, too.”

“No, my dear women, you need not bother about me. You go on. There is a person who will soon come for me,” said Thakur Sahib.

“Who wll come?” they asked him. “Will Muralidhar come Himself?” And they laughed.

Without wasting any more time they ran towards Gopinath Bazar. The vegetable vendor had thrown half a sackful of rotten potatoes beside the water tank. On any other day, the radheshyamis would have rushed there. But today, they had no time even for such things.

Like the newspapers describing the scandals of Behariji the other day, today many more such papers revealing scandals of various temples including the Muralidhar Temple, flew about in the breeze. But no one had the time to look at them.

Thakur Sahib sat for a long time, waiting for that unknown friend whom he had met for such a short time. In the meantime, the commotion created by the voices of thousands of people, and the sounds of the chariot and the procession, faded further and further away. Thakur Sahib grew impatient. The place where he sat was getting deserted and quiet as a graveyard. Even the young Brahmin boy who did the regular daily parikrama had passed by, playing his cymbals as he went. Had he forgotten? It would not be surprising if he had forgotten. He was, after all, a young lad.

Thakur Sahib felt disappointed. Time, he mused, is often cruel; it sometimes also plays tricks. And the pervading atmosphere sometimes makes one cruel too. Otherwise, Mrinalini would not have become so avaricious for money for her last rites, like the old radheshyamis. But then, he reflected, was that really cruelty or hard-heartedness? The chariot bells could be heard again in the distance. The sweet sound of the ringing bells seemed to be saying to him,

“Enjoy yourself up to the very last moment of your life if you get the chance.”

One word, one particular fragrance. Nowadays, everything and everyone seemed to whisper some Truth into his ears.

The grating sound of the halting chariot, could be heard. All its bells rang out together. Thakur Sahib became very impatient. And then he heard the unmistakable sound of a pair of sandals breaking the stillness of Gopinath Bazar.

Thakur Sahib clutched his walking stick eagerly.

He heard a voice, “Come, get up.”

“You have come,” said Thakur Sahib. “I knew you would come. Hold me here.” And the two of them walked slowly along the deserted road of Gopinath Bazar.

Truly, this picture of the youth helping the old man along the road was a very pleasing sight.

The great chariot of Rangaji had arrived near the chungi, and the crowds were so thick that the mighty wheels seemed to become submerged in a sea of humanity.

“You are trembling,” the boy said. “Hold on to me tightly. Would you like to go nearer, or would you prefer to stand here on this hillock and watch?”

“Take me nearer,” cried Thakur Sahib, “Take me as near as possible so that I can touch the sandalwood rath with my hands.”

The boy was silent, and Thakur Sahib said, “Oh, I suppose you are afraid to take me in to the midst of the milling crowd. Do not worry about that. Let us hurry. People say that the crowds will get thicker once the chariot crosses the bend in the chungi and turns towards the garden.”

They continued on their way and found that the chariot had stopped. The ritual of garlanding Rangaji with garlands of jasmine and roses from the five thousand temples of Vrindaban had started.

Suddenly, Thakur Sahib seemed to grow immensely strong, and just as the skeletal old radheshyamis gathered enough strength and rushed into the crowds to pull the huge ropes of the chariot, so the Thakur Sahib somehow became strong enough and, holding the boy’s hand, plunged uncaringly into the vast sea of humanity. He toppled over a couple of times in the great rush, and the old Jodhpuri coat he wore was almost torn off his back. But, like a mother clutching her infant in desperation, he managed to hold on to his coat. The fragrance of the masses of jasmine flowers and the equally fragrant incense smoke filled the air. This was the holiest of the holy chariots, and merely touching it, or falling in worship before it, were immensely pious deeds!

The chariot started moving again, with the ringing of its huge bells. The people seemed to almost walk over Thakur Sahib and the boy. The boy said, “Let us go back now. See, that huge crowd is rushing this way like a storm….”

But, not heeding the boy, Thakur Sahib sped like an arrow aiming straight at the massive wheels!

“Catch him, catch him,” yelled the youth.

But who could catch him? With an unusual spurt of strength, the old man sped forward….And before anyone could do anything, the blind Thakur Sahib jumped and fell under the great wheels of the holy chariot.

He was still alive, for a moment, after they dragged him out from under the wheels. And in that one moment, hundreds of jasmine garlands thrown from the chariot covered his entire body. It was as though, at this moment of death, Thakur Sahib was trying to take on his old head, the garlands of those holy flowers whose petals he had not had the opportunity to touch while alive. And, even in the din and chaos of the Rath Yatra, a voice rang out. A voice full of heartfelt sympathy and sorrow, “He was a good and pious man. That is why he chose to die beneath the wheels of the holy chariot! Give him a last sip of water, give him some water…”

The chariot could not afford to wait, it must continue with its journey. Even a moment’s delay, or misuse of the pre-set time would mean disaster to the country, death to its people, so it must roll on. The great wheels rolled forward stained with Thakur Sahib’s blood.

Seventeen

Anupama's health started to deteriorate. At the same time, Dr Roychoudhury's funds also started to dwindle fast.

He had come to Braj with a very substantial amount, but now there was hardly anything left. Yet, the generous and large-hearted doctor was quite unaware of the fact. Anupama used to take care of all their money matters but now she was too sick and weak to do so. She could hardly lift her head.

In the clinic Dr Roychoudhuri had heard that a man was lying in the lane on the right side of the chungi, waiting for death. The only thing he wore was the kanthimala, the garland of holy basil beads, around his neck. But Dr Roychoudhuri did not feel any urge to go to him. In fact he felt none of his previous zeal.

Again a message arrived. There was no one to even give a little water to the man who lay dying in Banakhandi's Mahadev shrine. It was sad and fearsome and utterly shameful that the ugly vulture with the broken wing was waiting and watching, perched on the tree above the dying man.

Even then Dr Roychoudhuri remained unmoved.

One day, the radheshyami who looked after Anupama told Saudamini, "Why don't you sit with your mother and talk to her? Don't you know that if you wish to, you can encourage her to live for some more time?" Another day, she said to her, "You must forget your own self for sometime. Can't you do even that much for your mother's sake?" Her face had turned quite ugly as she spoke, and her voice had taken on a disgusted tone. She had passed the limit of her tolerance.

Again she spoke: "It is only for a few days. After that, no power on earth will be able to keep your mother alive. After that, you will be at liberty to go where you will, to a Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Punjabi, or wherever you like… But…"

Dr Roychoudhuri, too, had become very distressed and disappointed since some time. His body had become bent and he appeared to be always looking down at his shoes. He had never been a garrulous man. In fact he spoke very little. But now he seemed hesitant to even look up at the faces of other people.

No, she could not tolerate these things any longer. Time was flying past like a winged arrow and maybe it was time for her lover to come. It had been a long time, after all. He might have already come many times, and left from the door of the Rangaji Temple. Yes indeed, time was speeding past like an arrow!

The sky had been downcast since the morning and it started raining heavily in the afternoon. Unseasonal rain. The peahen which was on the roof, playing with her baby, ran inside and took shelter inside Saudamini's bedroom. Its feathers had become pale, and its little chick looked more like a duckling than

a budding peacock!

The afternoon rain and the cloudy atmosphere, intensified Saudamini's depression and her frightening sense of loneliness. She felt like going to each of Braj's two thousand radheshyamis and asking them one question "Did you also face a situation similar to mine?"

The sky did not clear up even after the rain had stopped. Should she try again, she wondered? There were so many inspiring stories of selfless sacrifice in Braj which had become immortal. They should be an example for her.

People say that time and effort can bring about great changes, that even thought processes can be turned around to quite a different direction. She wondered if she was a sinful woman. Whether what she was thinking was itself a sinful act. But these baffling ideas about sin and virtue had never really touched her innermost mind or bothered her overmuch. She came to the conclusion that she was a dissolute woman. She had lost everything that was important in life. Yet here she was, willing to sacrifice all for the sake of a love that could only bring untold misery. She found herself poised delicately on the threshold of a vital point in her life, at the point of a crossroad as it were. Living here in the holy city of Braj, she was consciously prepared to put out of her mind all memories of her husband. She met a middle-aged radheshyami who was going around a bel tree after pouring the ritualistic milk on the Saligram in Gopeshwar. She had met this woman a number of times before. She called this woman, and looking her straight in the eye asked her, "Tell me something. I realise, of course, that you cannot completely erase all memories of your husband from your mind. But now so many years have passed since he died. Tell me truly, have you never tried, after all these years, to wipe away all thoughts and memories of him?"

The woman had not expected such a question from Saudamini. She replied, "When those memories did start getting foggy and hazy, I always tried to remove the haze with the help of chameli petals."

"And what about your physical hunger? Tell me the truth," persisted Saudamini.

She looked up at Saudamini's face. Her eyes filled with tears. Catching hold of her hands, she again asked, "Do you really feel like recovering that old lost love? Do not lie to me."

The woman looked up like a startled deer, and then she collapsed on Saudamini's chest, just as the soft mud of a river bank erodes and falls into the river.

As soon as the woman had regained herself, Saudamini again asked her, "Tell me, you must have done something, taken some steps, to save yourself from that deep torment of loneliness. What did you do? You must tell me."

The woman replied as frankly as she could. She said, "At first I used wander

in the jasmine gardens. It was a long time ago. My hair was long and black then. I walked up and down the jasmine gardens and tried to question myself. It was not easy. In fact, it was a cruel and tormenting task. I used to wander in the jasmine gardens, and a group of young men who came by boat from Mathura and landed at the Akrur Ghat, also used to walk in the same gardens. They came to feed rasabari fruit to the peacocks. One day, one of them threw a handful of the fruit at me. Then, throwing back his longish hair from his forehead, he stood looking at my feet for a long time. I went to the jasmine garden for many days after that incident to test myself. Again one day, another boy threw some fruit at me, and this time instead of my feet, the youth gazed at my flowing black hair. But I did not stop going to the garden. That was a long time ago. And now, look, those same feet are rough and cracked. And I have also attained a permanent place in the bhajan ashram. Believe me…." Saying this, she came close to Saudamini and whispered, "Sometimes, sitting in the bhajan ashram, when I put my hands into my bag to count my prayer beads, I again feel the softness of those chameli petals. When I was a young girl, people used to praise me saying that I was a good, virtuous girl. Even now, people respect me. But see, even though my bag has become old and worn, yet I still sometimes feel the softness of chameli when I count my prayer beads…"

Saudamini did not want to trouble the woman with any further questions. The wind also increased in velocity, and the peahen with her young ones also seemed to get worried. In spite of the sound of the wind, Saudamini could hear her mother coughing. It was a terrible cough. She wondered whether she should go up to her mother's room and caress her head. She was her mother after all, who had borne untold worries and sufferings for her sake. And now she was nearing the end of her life.

She heard someone banging on the door. As soon as she opened the door, Dr Roychoudhuri walked in. He looked around the room. Then he said, "Your room is in a very bad shape. I have had no time to look after your needs so far. Those holes in the walls have become like tunnels. Haven't you noticed them?"

The doctor who usually spoke so little, seemed to have become talkative today. Saudamini looked at him in surprise.

"You should put up a thick curtain. People come this way to draw water from the well there."

Moving away from the window, he came and sat near her.

Saudamini noticed that her father had got thinner in the last few days. His back was bent, and his skin…She had not even looked at him properly for a long time. She found that she could not look at him for long without her eyes filling up with tears.

"I have done something without asking you," he said. Saudamini could hardly believe her ears!

"You are very surprised, are you not?" he asked. "See how quickly time flies.

So many people have left Braj in the last few days and gone away forever. Thakur Sahib suddenly passed away like that the other day. Who knows when our time will come? When that inevitable time comes, silently, like a thief…"

He was quiet for some time. This, thought Saudamini, was her father. A man whose closest ally was extreme patience, calm intelligence, and innate strength. This was her father who always trod upon a selfless path.

He spoke again, "Look at my hands. I have been feeling for some time that these hands are becoming weak. And that after some time I will become useless, and will have to spend the rest of my days sitting somewhere, huddled up like a useless burden."

Saudamini looked up at him. She saw that there were black shadows under his eyes. She remembered that she had seen just such shadows beneath the eyes of the artist, Chandrabhanu Rakesh, as he sat carving his astadhatu statues. Maybe, the ancient sculptors had similar shadows under their eyes, as they sat carving more than four hundred years ago! It was curious.

"I have written a letter to that friend of yours," said her father. "It is necessary that he come here now." He came near Saudamini, and caressed her hair for a long time with his dry hands. "It is time to meet him face to face. Do not think that anyone has forced this time on us. No, it has come in the natural process. Now, get up, and get ready."

She wondered whether she had been very ungrateful, whether she had done anything that her parents had not liked. She remembered the days of her youth. She had realised, from her childhood, the sheer cruelty of intentionally hurting others. She remembered how Anupama had once said to her, "You are the light of my eyes, my child, you are my jewel."

And for many, many years she had been the "light of he mother's eyes".

She had had numerous admirers before Subroto, her husband, had come into her life and shown her how divine true love could be. But in spite of the pleadings and persuadings of her admirers, she had never given in to them, had never allowed any of them to take liberties with her body. No, she had never done such things. So then, why was she in this situation? It could not be because she had been the apple of Anupama's eyes. Then it must be because she had always been bad, because this had been her nature since her childhood.

The sky became cloudy again. This time the peahen flew away with her baby, and Saudamini sat huddled in the dark, brooding on her loneliness.

Gradually the cold set in, and the radheshyamis crowded the clinic complaining of aches and pains, and swollen feet.

The Jamuna was clothed in an unearthly light on these mornings.

Everything seemed to go wrong at the same time. It was almost time for him to come, and Saudamini scanned each boat eagerly as it arrived from Mathura. Every time she saw the lamp of a boat cut through the thick morning fog, at

every sound of the oars hitting the water, she jumped up in a sort of nervous excitement. But then, she wondered, what was this excitement for? She had thought that some of her emotions and feelings had dried up long ago. But she realised that she had been wrong.

The Christian youth who dreamed of leading her along a new and healthy path, seemed to have been waiting eagerly for this letter. A boat from the Akrur Ghat of Mathura had come and anchored at Vrindaban's Kesighat on the very day that a group of foreigners had created such a commotion because they were not allowed entry into an abandoned temple. It was the dark night of Amabashya, the last day of the dark fortnight of the month. Dr Roychoudhury had been at the clinic till very late, treating the old women with the swollen feet. Then, after washing at the well, he handed over the keys to the chowkidar and went upstairs. Saudamini had fallen asleep long before this. This was unusual, as sleep had not come easily to her for a long time.

Suddenly there was the sound of someone knocking and she woke up with a start. Someone was knocking on her door. Some patient might have come to the dispensary, maybe one of those radheshyamis with swollen feet, who, unable to tolerate the pain any longer, had come for treatment although it was midnight. … Yet these same radheshyamis would brave the extreme cold of winter to go to the stables to scramble for rotten potatoes! What a curious life these women led!

She got up and opened the door, and saw Dr Roychoudhuri standing there, hurricane lamp in hand. His feet were bare.

"You want my room for the sick radheshyamis, I suppose," said Saudamini. "Give me a little time, and I will shift my bed upstairs."

Dr Roychoudhuri rolled up the wick of the lamp.

"No, you do not have to shift your bed. I have come with some news," replied her father. "That friend of yours has arrived. He is waiting for you near the Vaishnab chhatri near the ghat. It is not a very good time to come, but that cannot be helped. Anupama is asleep and will wake up only in the morning. Go and wrap yourself well in a warm shawl and follow me."

"But… do I have to meet him…?"

"Go, get your shawl and follow me," repeated Dr Roychoudhury.

As she wrapped the shawl around her, she mumbled to herself: You have really understood me. One should test oneself exactly in this way.

Father and daughter went out. The sky was overcast and it was probably going to rain again. They saw some radheshyamis, wrapped up against the cold, sitting on the roadside. They sat listening to the melodious strains of the shehnai floating out from Rangaji Temple. Although they must have seen Saudamini and her father walking by with the lantern, they showed no curiosity about them. They sat entranced by the beautiful music that emanated

from the temple. There was a boat anchored at the ghat, its lamp light flickering as the wind rocked it.

Dr Roychoudhuri spoke. “Go,” he said, “I will wait here. You see that boat there? Go.”

She went forward. The wind increased its velocity, and everything became covered with sand. But she could see her father in the distance, standing with the lantern. Something wrapped itself round her feet and she was startled. But it was only a piece of cloth someone must have left behind. She looked down and saw that it was a woman’s colourful chaddar. Some dead woman. A fortunate woman who had died while her husband lived. She must have worn it when she was carried here for cremation. By this time, her father, with his hurricane lamp, had also become invisible, covered by the sand blown in by the rising storm. She came to the boat and he climbed down from it and stood on the sand.

Coming near her, he extended his hand toward her, and leaning on his arm, she climbed on to the boat. It was strong boat and it rocked gently in the wind. But suddenly it lurched violently as the storm grew in intensity.

So, ultimately, this was it. But, was she really looking for this? Was it really true that this man, sitting so close to her that she could feel his every breath, was really the man who meant all the world to her?

How could the holy dust of Braj become so meaningless to her?

Her forehead started perspiring! They sat down together.

She looked up at the man sitting so close to her and said, “I have no attraction for this sacred land other than you… All my old memories have become covered with dust and are now shadowy. I have learned to think of my late husband more as an enemy than anything else, and I have also learned to root out his faults. To tell you the truth, I was so infatuated with him, that I never saw any fault in him. Just imagine, I have had to seek consolation thinking of the cruelty, the injustice, of it all.

The wind increased, and the river Jamuna’s sands swirled in a whirlwind, creating havoc all around. The sounds of Rangaji’s shehnai music dissolved in the wind.

“Hold me. Please hold me as tight as you can! You are crying…People say you are a Christian. Yes, you are a Christian. But see, the warmth of your body against my heart is the same. Believe me, it is the same as that of Subroto, my beloved husband. It is the same, exactly the same!”

She lost all control of herself. Flinging aside all thoughts of dignity and self control, she cried out passionately, “Kiss me! Kiss me! Your touch is the same, the old touch…” And like the soft malleable mud of the river bank, she fell on her lover’s chest.

“I am no longer in a state to talk rationally to you. At this moment that is

impossible. I was waiting so eagerly for this. It is only now that I realise just how eagerly I was waiting!"

The wind was getting stronger, and the sturdy boat started to rock dangerously on the waves of the Yamuna. The sky was lit up by streaks of lightening. It would not be safe to stay on the boat much longer.

"Come, let us go to that abandoned shack over there. The storm is about to start."

They got down from the boat, and walked towards the shack on Dheer Samir Ghat. The sands of the river bank started blowing about wildly. She had never before seen the Yamuna in such tumult. They were obstructed at every step by the ferocity of the storm which sent up whirlwinds of sand that smashed against their bodies. The flashes of lightning revealed the Yamuna in her most terrifying form, and it seemed that at any moment, mighty and angry waves would smash into the ghats and drag them into her bosom.

They started running like two helpless children towards the abandoned shack. The terrifying storm increased in strength as midnight approached. Finally, they made their way to an old hovel at Kesighat and took shelter.

Saudamini wondered whether she had really wanted this at the cost of everything else. She said, "You too must have sometimes felt that terrible sense of loneliness. You too are no longer young. Even in this dark, I can see silver streaks in your hair…"

He said nothing, but looked down.

"No, no. There is no need to feel bad. Everything has become ordinary now. At this moment everything has become very simple. Kiss me, or embrace me like those passionate lovers. Everything has become simple at this moment. I have been waiting so eagerly for this day."

"You are crying."

"Do you know what I thought? I thought that this day would show me the direction of my life. That today all hesitations and rigid principles would be wiped out. Come closer. Today the storm out there and the tumult in my heart have become one. I have become a monster, a fiend! You are a Christian, and I am a Hindu. Yet there is this passion, this love, between the two of us."

An unusually strong gust of wind threatened to tear apart the old wall of the shack.

"Do you know, I feel like comparing the people who try to put you in a separate category to a cruel butcher!"

And then, putting her head between her knees, she sobbed like a little girl. The wind increase in ferocity, and there was the sound of logs that the stormy river had brought in its wake, smashing against the bridge of barrels. Someone seemed to be crying out in terror near the whirlwind in the tempestuous waters of the Yamuna. A few radheshyamis drown every year in that place when the

sacred river turns tumultuous. Today the water had taken on a life of its own, had become, as it were, devoid of all sense!

They heard the sound of something come rolling down near the broken wall. Saudamini became alert. It was the lantern her father had carried. Was he, then, still sitting on the steps of the ghat?

She looked outside, but could see no one, no ghostly figure, sitting there. Something that looked like bits of cotton wool was blown in through the open door of the shack. Probably a radheshyami had hidden the money for her last rites inside her bedding, and some group of greedy men had torn her bedding up and grabbed the money…

Today, at this moment, he seemed content to sit watching and listening to Saudamini. He sat looking at her with a childlike curiosity.

Saudamini came back, and knelt down in front of her lover. “Let us bring that plank of wood here,” she said. “Some boys wrote there the details of the scandals of the priest of the Madhav Narayan Temple. Someone has thrown it here. We can rest awhile on it, at least until the storm abates. See how fearsome it has become. Those turbulent waves seem to be rushing this way. A long time ago, I dreamt of a scene exactly like this. The heads of the great waves seemed to have turned into the heads of cruel butchers!”

“Listen, my mother will not live very long. And I am responsible for it. And when I think about my mother, it seems to me that those waves are rushing towards me… I hear a sound like the hooves of powerful horses! That terrible, fearsome sound is rushing at me! Come, come nearer! Kiss me, or hold me tight and feel my heat! You may think that it is a simple thing. But, for me today it is a most important thing.”

“You cannot understand what it means to me.”

“Come, come closer.”

They brought the plank of wood on which the scandals of the ‘Madhav Narayan’ priests were detailed, and sat down on it, very close to each other. At that moment, they looked like two pure flowers as they sat on that plank.

It was now the last hours of the night. She went outside. The storm had abated sometime during the night. But now the frightening storm seemed to be preparing to attack again. The river was rising again. She walked forward. A poignantly sad cry of loneliness floated out from the heart of this tumult. A nameless sorrow tore her heart apart. Was this really what she wanted, she wondered again, exactly this?

Everything seemed strange, unfamiliar. And what about her mind? Her subconscious mind had waited so eagerly for this meeting.

But this longed-for meeting could do nothing, could not make any impression at all on her innermost heart… Had anyone else been defeated like this by herself?

Again she seemed to hear, more distinctly than before, that terrifying sound of the hooves of powerful horses! And like an unarmed, and injured soldier, she stood listening to it.…

Time was running out. Should she go back? But go back to what? Should she go back to those hurtful memories of her dead husband?

She looked back at the dilapidated shack she had left behind. No, no! There was no more time. Anupama's death was not far off … Why did things turn out like this? So many like her had accumulated many high-sounding sayings. Only the other day, the sannyasin from Deoghar had spoken of such inspiring things, and the radheshyamis had listened to him with tears of happiness in their eyes, taking every word to their hearts. They had rubbed the dust from his feet on their heads and cried out, "My body may dry up as I sit here, my flesh and bones may be shattered! But until I gain the capacity to understand some of the priceless things of the legendary kalpa tree, I will remain unshaken in this seat."

"Come away from intense love, and bondage! Did the ardha-narishwar form of the Lord Mahadev ever see the face of his beloved?"

"Truth has been hidden by a vessel of gold. Oh, Sun God, remove that veil so that I may see and perceive the eternal Truth!"

Many such inspiring things were said. But why was she not affected by any of these today, at this critical moment?

The waves of the river were rising and coming towards her and sudden gusts of strong wind were making it fearsome to go forward. It was almost morning. Anupama would die and she would win. As soon as she thought of heaven, all the closed windows of her soul opened up, and her confusions cleared. For one moment, an ethereal light seemed to make every open window of her soul terrifying.

No, no! She could not allow Anupama to win a victory in this manner! But, was it only because of anxiety?

She whispered a few words, intended for that Christian youth, whom she thought she had loved with her whole heart, "Forgive me and go back. Forgive me, please forgive me."

Big drops of rain started falling and the clouds loomed low. It seemed that the strong wind would crash into her frail body and tear it apart, and lightening and thunder smashed against the *peepar* pool. There was no need for such terrible preparations! There was no need for Nature to play such terrifying havoc merely for the sake of the life of a weak and frail young girl!

She walked on. Such an opportunity would never come her way again. Those waves were speeding towards her! They were mingling with that threatening and terrifying part of the river! She walked ahead.

She seemed to hear a cry floating out from near the *peepar* pool: "*Radhe*

dandawat, for Radha's sake, don't come any further! The Jamuna is getting flooded. Don't come any further!"

She understood what was happening. The snake-catcher was taking full advantage of the weather. The words *Radhe dandawat* echoed and re-echoed.

There was no more time to think. But until the very last moment, until she arrived at the very edge of the water, one question disturbed her, one question alone tore her apart: Why? Why did this have to happen?

There was no sign of her, other than her white widow's cloth which was found early in the morning, entangled with the colourful chaddar of a woman with a living husband. But as the morning light grew stronger, a strange thing happened to her piece of clothing. The chaddar, trampled under the feet of the inquisitive crowds who had gathered at the spot, took on the appearance of a writing tablet! And, after the curiosity of the prying radheshyamis was to some extent satisfied, this stone writing tablet became the centre of scandal mongering. Many scandalous stories were told, and there were some people who took a demonic pleasure in digging out more and more scandals.

Indeed, in the end, this white chaddar of hers truly became a writing stone on which many scandals were carved!

Eighteen

Soon, all signs of the destruction caused by the Jamuna that day were wiped out.

Sitting on a platform high up on the smooth sands of the river, the Baba from Deoghar again preached many wise sayings, many inspirational words. Numerous tents of devotees, from home and abroad, filled the large expanse of clean and sacred sand.

The artist, Rakesh, was seen wandering about the sands of the Jamuna for a few days after Saudamini's death. Then he sat on the steps of the Astasakhi temple, and started painting a picture. The paandas who scouted for pilgrims on the Atilla hillock, ridiculed him and shouted, "Rakesh, sir, you are painting footprints! Who do you think will buy this picture?"

It was though someone had provoked a sleeping serpent! The artist Chandrabhanu Rakesh jumped up in great agitation and anger. He shouted, "Yes, you are right, these are footsteps. Come forward, any one of you, come here. I have just picked up these footsteps from Jamuna's sands. Come and show me, any one of you, come and show me, which of these footsteps belong to a Christian, which to a Muslim, and which to a Hindu. Come on, show me!"

The group of jeering paandas could not utter a word! Indeed, they had heard, correctly it now appeared, that the artist haunted the satras for a piece of roti, and like a mentally ill person, he wandered around the radheshyami's hovels these days. One day he had even taken off his only chaddar, and covered an old sleeping radheshyami with it. One day he was seen near the Mathura railway junction. One of the many paandas who always crowded the area around the junction, asked him, "You are leaving? If we happen to see you somewhere, how shall we recognise you? Where will you be living?"

The old artist smiled. "Why, don't you remember what that lover of the arts, Ramkrishna Das, said about the last representative of Moghul sculpture, Ustad Ramprasadji? He said, 'He is a true Sadhu, a true philosopher and a real theoretician because the capacity to realise actual Reality is to understand real Beauty. That is why there is a kinship between a philosopher and an artist. Whatever God gave to the hands, He gave to the body and the voice too. He is having to live the life of a poor artist due to the exigencies of time.' Don't you remember these words of your Ramkrishna? There was only one way to recognise the last of the great Moghul sculptors: a heavily bearded face, a dirty dhoti but a clean dupatta across his chest. Whether he wore shoes or not is immaterial. You couldn't fail to recognise this last of the Moghul sculptors, Ramprasadji! But how will you recognise me? I am no last representative of any

great form of art. I am simply a useless descendent of the ancient astadhatu artists of Braj. It was easy to recognise Ramprasadji by his clean dupatta. You will not find any chaddar across my chest. It will be always as bare as you see it now. It seems that Sri Ramprasadji also wore a Gandhi cap on his head! Listen, perhaps you will see just such a Gandhi topi on my head too."

A clean Gandhi topi!

They shouted out together, "A Gandhi topi?"

"Yes, a Gandhi topi. A clean Gandhi topi!"

Afterword

Indira Goswami, as I remember her, always had an aura of immense, even startling, vibrancy. It began with her rebelliously curly hair, the ringlets bursting out of any attempted restraint or regulation. Then the smile, a curved bow which could reach across a crowded room like an arrow. The colour red in her bangles, in her vermilion *bindi*; the colour of strength, of Shakti. We met often during her years in Delhi, during seminars and readings, or at the India International Centre, and she would always come up with a warm, double edged compliment that would leave me smiling too. This sense of vitality and engagement marked all that Indira Goswami embarked upon. As a scholar, an academic, a translator, a poet, novelist and activist, she brought passion, belief and engagement to all that she did.

Popularly known as Mamoni Baideo or Mamoni Raisom Goswami to her Assamese admirers, she was born in Guwahati and remained true to her roots even though her writing was inspired by and located in the many other places she encountered in life's journey. Her first story was published when she was thirteen. With an admitted tendency to depression, she lived on the knife's edge as an adolescent. Her husband, Madhavan Raisom Iyenger, was killed in a car accident just eighteen months after they were married. She began writing seriously, and published *Ahiron* and *Chenabar Srot* (The Chenab's Current). Her experiences as a widow, and a research stint in Vrindavan, led to the publication of *Nilakanthi Braja* (The Blue-necked God),which interrogated the position of widows in Vrindavan and in Hindu society. Goswami's interest in Ramayana studies led to a comparative examination of the Tulsidasa Ramayana and the medieval Axamiya Ramayana of Madhava Kandali in *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra*.

It was after this phase, while Indira Goswami was the head of the Assamese department at Delhi University, that our occasional but illuminating friendship began. Both widowed young, both women writers, we shared an unspoken sympathy. I read *Dotal Hatir Uye Khuwa Howdah* (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker) when it appeared in English translation. She was by then recognised as a serious literary figure, and received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1982 and the Jnanpith award in 2000. Mamoni refused the Padma Sri in 2002 for reasons of political conviction. In 2008, she was conferred the Principal Prince Claus Award, a major honour to a unique writer, activist, and political mediator.

In 2009, Dr Malashri Lal and I published the co-edited anthology, *In Search of Sita—Revisting Mythology*. The book included a dialogue with Indira Goswami on 'Ramayana, The Human Story'. In the conversation, she spoke of her early

interest in *tantra*, and in Sufi poetry, especially the work of Mullah Masiha, who lived and wrote in Jehangir's time. She spoke of the books she was working on —*The Journey of Ravana* and *Thengphakhri*, the story of a Bodo woman who was appointed as a tax collector by the British, gathered from oral narratives.

Before that, Indira Goswami had spoken forcefully at the first Neemrana International Literature Festival on Assam and Assamese writing. To quote: 'My state, Assam, had produced some very beautiful writings long ago. Outsiders are very ignorant of Assam… Historical writings flourished in Assam from 1224. These history books are like fiction, in the sense that there are narratives about kings and queens, including one queen, Phuleswari, who was a temple dancer. In the Ramayana which was translated into Assamese in the 14th century, Rama is not a God. He is just a human being; he is a very good king.

'Khushwant Singh has said there are no writings on nature in Indian languages. But I have written a novel about rhinos. You will be surprised to know that once upon a time, the Assamese people used to plough their land with the help of rhinos. Then I wrote a novel on the elephants. In my childhood, I had an elephant as my playmate. Gradually he ran amok, killed a villager, and was shot dead before our eyes. The *howdah* of the elephant became a symbol in my novel…'

The last time I spoke to my friend and fellow writer was two years ago, to invite her to attend the Jaipur Literature Festival. She agreed, but then backed out because of her ill health. 'I wish I was better, Namita' she said, 'then I would have come.'

Writers live, travel, and continue living in inexplicable ways, through their books, through translations, through metaphors and refracted images. Their journeys do not end easily but continue, always, in strange and unexpected directions. So will Mamoni Goswami's.

Namita Gokhale

New Delhi 2011

About the Author and Translator

Indira Goswami has been honoured with many awards including the country's highest literary prize, the Jnanpith Award. *Words from the Mist* directed by JahnuBarua is one of the many biographical films made on her eventful life. In 2008, she became India's first Principal Prince Claus Laureate for her contribution to literature, culture and social change.

Gayatri Bhattacharyya is a former lecturer in English at the University of Guwahati

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